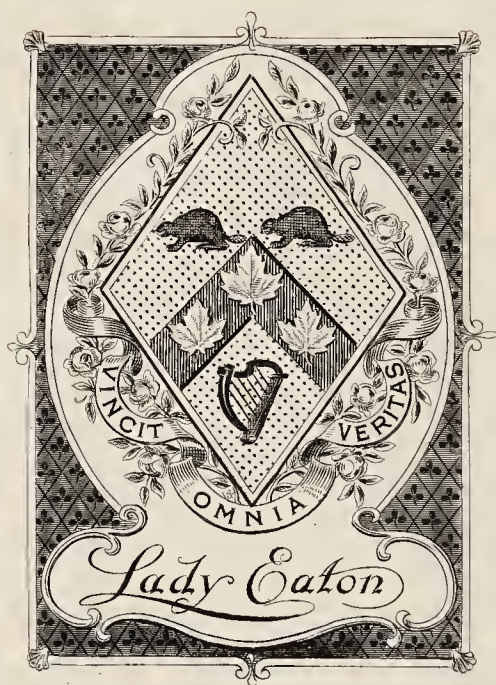






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Literature of Italy 1265—1907.

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With a General Introduction by William
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DAMIANO

THE STORY OF A POOR FAMILY

BY

GIULIO CARCANO

THE DEWS OF DEATH ANNOUNCED TO DAMIANO THAT
THE END WAS AT HAND

From an Original Drawing by Albert Henche

2

THE ORIGINAL DRAWING

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THE END WAS AT HAND

From an Original Drawing by Albert Henrichs

DAMIANO

THE STORY OF A POOR FAMILY

BY

GIULIO CARCANO

TRANSLATED BY WILLIAM SHEPARD WALSH

THE NATIONAL ALUMNI

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INTRODUCTION

“**V**OLUMINOUS, did you call me?” asked Edward Gibbon of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, seeking for a repetition to his face of a compliment that had been reported to him from behind his back.

“Voluminous,” briskly responded Sheridan, ever willing to sacrifice a friend—and even so distant an acquaintance as the truth—to a joke.

Of all the authors of Italy, there is surely none to whom both epithets might be applied more justly than to Giulio Carcano. His fecundity is almost as amazing as that of Lope de Vega in Portugal. His variety is greater. He wrote poetry and prose, fact and fiction, with equal facility, though with various degrees of felicity. But he never was dull and he was always lucid. And when he had no original work in hand he wreaked himself on translations. He was author, editor, critic, dramatist, orator, statesman. He was a member, actual or honorary, of every learned or literary society in Italy, and by virtue of his translation of Shakespeare—still accepted as their standard version by his countrymen—was a vice-president of the English Shakespeare Society.

He was born August 7, 1812, in Milan, and he died there September 5, 1884. At eighteen years of age he published a little volume entitled *Verses to My Mother*. He followed up this very moderate success with other poems, with biographies, histories, and tales, until in 1839 he struck his true note in *Angiola Maria, a Domestic Story*, and achieved an international reputation. Though he was in some sort a follower of his illustrious fellow-citizen, Alessandro Manzoni, his love for domestic portraiture, for current types, and for photographic

detail, make his work a sort of connecting link between the historical romance of his master and the realism of his contemporary pupils.

Damiano, the Story of a Poor Family, was first published in 1840 and ran through many editions. It is in many respects his best, as it is certainly the most representative of all his novels, though it never surpassed the popularity of *Angiola Maria*.

It is a striking picture of life as it was lived by all classes of society in Milan, the typical city of Northern Italy, at the beginning of the second quarter of the nineteenth century, while the Napoleonic legend still overshadowed the souls of men, and therefore it is that one among all the multitudinous novels of our author which is most certain of survival. None of Carcano's works has before been translated into English, and the present version of *Damiano* was prepared expressly for this series.

Wm. W. W. W.

CHAPTER I

A VETERAN OF THE ROYAL GUARD

BEYOND the bridge of San Celso is a neighborhood which still preserves the honest democratic features of old Milan. A solitary street, running across fields and orchards, leads from this suburb of the Vigentina gate to another, a short distance outside of the city walls. It is known as the Via di Quadronno. However fond I may usually be of searching among the chronicles of Milan, I shall not seek for the origin of this name—which, meaning thereby no disrespect to the learned doctors and antiquaries who, from dusty and worm-eaten tomes, could extract heaven knows what strange and strained explanation, might lead to unnecessary waste of thought. But to those that may not know it, I will say that the young lover, the friend of solitude, and the well-to-do citizen, both of whom love the open sky, a little greensward, and the rural silence within the circle of those walls, often turn into this crooked and deserted street, losing themselves in dreams and in golden anticipations of the future.

Our story begins on the fourth of May, 1831, the eve of that day which ten years before had witnessed on the rocky mid-ocean desert of St. Helena the last hour of the "man of destiny." On this, the eve of that anniversary, one of the obscure heroes of the people, one of Napoleon's veterans, after a hundred battles, lay dying in poverty and solitude in a mean little house in the sparsely inhabited Via di Quadronno.

The sun, which had not quite disappeared behind the distant, majestic summits of Monte Rosa, reflected a fitful gleam upon the white and delicate gargoyles of the

Duomo, and clad with a brighter and almost fiery ray the golden statue of the Madonna which, on the highest of the pinnacles, appears to invoke the protection of heaven upon the city. That city itself, not yet sunk into the silence of night, was full of a confused murmur, while little by little it was enveloped in an endless veil of transparent, delicate mist, through which twinkled the early stars.

At this hour a little procession of the worthy poor, the last who had lingered in the church after the evening benediction, emerged devoutly, but with hasty steps, from the portico of the Church of St. Celso, accompanying the priest who bore Christ in the sacrament. They were going to the house of one of their brethren, and they proceeded along the sidewalk, to avoid interference with the lordly carriages, which, in the accustomed after-dinner circuit of the walls, passed rapidly through this little-frequented suburb as they carried their bored occupants to the theater or to some evening reception.

At the sound of the sacristan's bell, a few honest old men and young women halted on their way, and, ranging themselves behind the *baldacchino*, increased the number of these humble worshipers of our Lord. At house-doors and shop entrances men took off their hats, and women and children knelt at the passing of the sacrament. On all sides, as the pious crowd advanced, could be seen through the windows of every house, on every floor, lights blazing as a sign of respect and devotion, while the good neighbors asked one another whither and to whom the sacrament was being borne at that hour.

The little procession turned into the Via di Quadronno. In this street, flanked only here and there by a few small houses arranged in groups and lined for a considerable portion of its length by a little ditch of greenish and slow-running water, they stepped along illumined by the melancholy light of the wax tapers and lanterns which surrounded the priest.

The priest intoned the litanies of the saints and, at the name of every saint invoked, the crowd answered in a melancholy and monotonous accent, "Pray for him!"

In large cities, under the malign influence of customs that generate the tyranny of fashion, indifference, and *ennui*, the finer feelings of the heart are nearly always spoiled. In the presence of the mystic and moving functions of the Church, the soul is often incapable of lifting itself to the infinite, remains shrunk within the husk of selfishness, and cannot understand how much truth and beauty dwell in the simplest and commonest solemnities of a religion which blesses both the cradle and the grave, and so sanctifies life and death alike. Nevertheless, when the mystery of life becomes overwhelming, it is impossible not to feel deep emotion in those humble yet sublime scenes which pass before all eyes at the last visit of God to the bedside of a dying man. At the hour when the past is nothing but the dream of a memory, and the present is a prolonged sigh of human grief which foresees its end and fears it; in that hour in which men abandon us, it is God who visits us, and who, on the last day of our earthly pilgrimage, gives us the bread of true liberty. And the servant of the Lord comes with the same consolations and promises to the curtained pomp of the royal bed as to the bare cot of the beggar. With the same words of love and peace, he places the Host of reconciliation and forgiveness upon the lips of the just man, who passes away in his own bed, and on those of the murderer who is about to mount the steps of the scaffold. Thus religion speaks to man the first word and the last.

But already, through that crooked street, the faithful procession had reached the few houses in the middle of that quarter; and, having passed in front of an old and humble oratory in the ancient square, it stopped at the threshold of a house, smaller and meaner than the others, whose large roof, jutting forward, almost concealed the

few unequally sized windows. Through the small glass panes of one of the windows could be seen a flickering light.

Those who accompanied the sacrament knelt in rows within the gate of that decaying house, at the entrance to a long passage-way, while the priest advanced into the courtyard, preceded by the sacristan and the clerk, and followed by four or five old men who carried the holy candles. They ascended by a high and narrow staircase into the apartment of the sick man.

The door, which had responded to the knocker below, was open, and according to custom two boys came to meet the minister of the Lord. One of them—the younger—was weeping bitterly. The other was silent and grave, but otherwise gave no sign of grief.

Passing through the first room, the priest entered into that wherein the patient lay. An old man, entirely bald, with long, snow-white beard and moustache, with hollow, fixed eyes, and the mark of death already in his face, raised himself from his seat on the low, disheveled bed at sight of the sacrament, lifted head and hands toward heaven, and, with a seeming renewal of youth, held himself erect in the presence of the priest. Opening wide his eyes in which the lamp of life still burned, he began to speak in a clear but tremulous voice:

“It is ten years to-day since he also died thus!”

Then, slowly making the sign of the cross, he allowed his hands to fall to his side and his head upon his breast, and, closing his eyes, became as silent and motionless as a corpse.

The old soldier of Napoleon had donned for the last time his veteran uniform—that coat of white cloth, trimmed with green on breast and sleeves, under which his aged heart still beat quietly and calmly as in the days of battle. From his buttonhole hung, on a ribbon of faded green, the only, the most precious jewel he ever had possessed—the knightly insignia of the iron cross. On

the coverlet, at one side, he had laid a crucifix, at the other the sword which for many years he had allowed to rust in its scabbard. Now that his last day had come, he wished to keep it near him as a final memorial of his past life. On the left of the bed a group of women knelt on the bare floor. Among them were the wife and daughter of the dying man, the first crouched in a wild abandonment of grief overwhelmed by weariness, her eyes bathed in scalding tears; the other humbly composed in the act of prayer with a holy candle burning beside her. In this attitude she resembled one of those seraphim in the pictures of some of the old masters. She was beautiful, though extremely pale, breathing in every action a resigned calm and I know not what of heavenly sweetness. Behind the mother and daughter, waiting expectantly, stood two or three good women of the neighborhood, who had run to offer their help in this day of sorrow. At the other side of the bed knelt the two sons—the youths who, a moment before, had come to meet the sacred *viaticum*. The younger no longer wept, but followed with his eyes every motion of the priest. The elder, on the other hand, never took his eyes off his father's face.

The priest upon entering had pronounced the benediction prescribed by the ritual of the Church: "Peace be to this house," whereto the sacristan and his followers had replied: "And to all who dwell in it." Then, the clerk, having spread the white *corporale* upon a little table, lighted the blessed candles. The priest placed the pyx on the table, and, having with the aspersorium of holy water made the sign of the cross over the bed and over all the bystanders, he blessed them with the words of the prophet: "Sprinkle me with hyssop, and I shall be made whole; wash me and I shall become whiter than snow."

The old man re-opened his eyes, but dreamily, as if unconscious of the mystic ceremonies. He convulsively pressed, first the sword and then the crucifix with his

fingers. The priest prayed, and, once more blessing the invalid, he took out from the pyx and held up before him the Divine Host.

The veteran raised himself, looked from one son to the other, clasped his hands, and murmured as if to himself: "It was better twenty years ago!" But when the priest, leaning over the bed and pronouncing the words of mystery, placed the Host upon his tongue, he answered with a firm and confident voice:

"So be it!"

Then the priest said to the bystanders: "Let us go in peace, in the name of the Lord!" Once more he took up the sacred vessel of silver and, blessing the dying brother, departed with the little procession of the faithful.

In the room they had left, after the sound of their voices and their footsteps had died away in the distance, fell a calm, an uninterrupted silence, as if in that bed no longer lay a man whose last night had come. The mother and the three children remained kneeling as before; the old man's eyes had closed again; nothing could be heard save his labored breathing.

Half an hour passed. Then the invalid turned to raise himself, and making a little movement with his left hand, cried: "Damiano!" It was the name of his eldest son, who, leaning over him, and clasping his hand with keenest affection, pressed hot kisses upon it, then held it to his heart to warm it, for the hand was very cold.

"My Damiano, my son!" said the old soldier, in a gentle and serious voice: "I have faced death a thousand times, but I never felt what I feel at this hour. I am no longer Victor; I can no longer do anything for you."

"Father mine"—the boy interrupted.

"Let me say it! I have run my course, it was even too long. Oh, I should not have died thus miserably—in a bed like an old man who is afraid! But when I think that the last hours of *that man* were like mine—it is possible that Victor may see him again in a little while."

He remained silent for a moment. The bystanders all understood that as usual he was speaking of Napoleon.

"Now it is your turn," he continued, "you must be the head of the house, the father of your brother and your sister, the companion of your mother. Poor woman! she always loved me well, and I did nothing for her, and little for you. A crabbed, impatient old man, obstinately set in my own ideas, in my soldierly ways, I could not re-fashion myself for the duties of the day, and that is the reason why I leave you as poor as I brought you into the world. But if the priests are not useless, and if what they have told me is true—that God pardons everything—He will pardon me also. Ah, if I had earlier left my place in the world, I should not feel what is now upon my soul. But you, Damiano, you will do better than I."

The youth interrupted with sorrowful haste:

"No, no! the Lord is good—the Lord will have pity on us and will not take you away from your own, from your house!"

"No, the thing is finished," answered the sick man. "It is better so, because I am now a burden upon you—and good for nothing, like the poor wounded souls in a hospital. But at least I know your heart, Damiano. I know what you would have been in other times, but to-day we exist, we do not live. Remember your father; he may perhaps have a long account to settle over there, because he sees terrible moments—things in this world never having succeeded with him. But if he leaves you nothing else, he leaves you the memory of a poor man who always walked with upright head in all the devious paths of life—and that should be worth something, in the name of God!—a good conscience and a good name!"

It seemed impossible that the old man should still retain the strength to pronounce these words. Damiano listened reverently, though in an agony of tears. His younger brother, who, until then, had wept quietly, now

began to sob, but, to subdue this cry of the heart, he hid his face in his hands and threw himself across his father's bed. Meanwhile, spent with vigil, suffering and anxiety, Victor's wife staggered and would have fallen had not her daughter—who seemed an angel of pity in this family—caught her in her arms and with the superior strength of her youth placed her in a chair.

The invalid, fortunately, had not observed this. Absorbed in deep thought, his hands extended, he clasped in one of them that of his eldest son, laying the other upon the blond head of the younger. Damiano still cherished hope in his heart. Seeing his father re-animate himself as by a miracle, after the continuous torpor of days and weeks, he hoped that heaven would still prolong a little further this dear life. Hearing him speak so many words with his usual calm and with the sweetness of an affection that evidently came straight from his heart, Damiano believed that all was not yet lost and he ventured to say:

"Be quiet and do not torment yourself with such thoughts; do not talk of dying."

"And what matters it, Damiano?" ventured the old man. "Better to-day than to-morrow. The life I have spent seems to me but a day. I only turn to you to say that I should have been more content if I had been able to leave you some property—you poor young things!—and that is the thorn in my flesh. For you, Damiano, I grieve less, because I know well that you never will need for anything, but poor Celso, still a child! Hearts as timid and simple as his are always the victims of knaves or stronger men. Enough, I commend him to you; I know you love each other, and you will think of him, of your poor mother, and of my Stella, who will be your guardian angel."

The inner weariness of the invalid had shortened his breath and forced him to say for the last time all that he had at heart. Now he fell back exhausted upon the

bed, his bald head buried in disordered pillows, his heavy arms stiffened into rigidity, and all his body stretched out as if he were already dead. Damiano, white now as his father, touched him, sought his pulse. He spoke no word, a shiver ran through his frame. The boy placed his right hand upon his father's heart. It still beat. He had fallen into a tranquil slumber; the awful hour had not yet sounded for him.

At that moment the physician arrived. Passing the house on his way, he had come up to see whether the sick man, whom he had given up, still breathed. He entered with a slow step, keeping his hat on his head. He was one of those men who, in the houses of the poor, wrap themselves in the paltry pride of science, and the comfort, or rather the affront of a medical opinion falls from their lips only by accident. He threw a cold glance on the invalid, on the anxious family that crowded around him, then, holding a lighted candle to the lips of the poor man, and seeing that the flame stirred, he said:

"He will not end so soon as I expected. Not for nothing was this man hardened by the Russian ice. Come, now, don't cry so, you women! It is not yet time. Leave him in peace; he sleeps. As for me, there is nothing more for me to do here. If he asks for drink, give him the potion the prescription for which I left with you this morning, and a sedative."

So saying, he went out, not without having cast an ambiguous glance at Stella, who, lifting toward him eyes filled with tears, seemed to expect from his words the mercy they had begged from Heaven. The doctor was a bachelor of forty, who prided himself on being a connoisseur of beauty, and he did not disdain, from time to time, to ogle the modest flowers with whom the practice of his severe science frequently threw him in contact.

CHAPTER II

“LIGHTS OUT!”

AN hour later, all was silent in the house. The women had momentarily withdrawn with Celso into the next room. This was poorer and barer than the other; nothing was to be seen here save a few odd chairs, and two beds, untouched for who knows how long.

They sat down, gazing speechless at one another, their ears attent for the slightest movement in the next room, until at last, little by little, the weariness of grief and of broken slumbers should prepare them to sustain the harder blow they expected. Damiano insisted on remaining at his post to watch over his father.

The light of the holy candle threw a tremulous ray upon the brow of the sleeping old man. And Damiano, alone, immovable, thought of his father, of the morrow, of the painful battle of life, of the tremendous verities of death. “Great God!” he said in his heart, “how heavy is the burden Thou seekest to impose on me! My soul staggers under it, and Thou only canst inspire me with love and faith!”

At that moment a cautious knock on the door attracted the lad’s attention. He ran to see who it might be, and immediately returned, very softly, accompanied by a man, leaning upon a large Indian cane, for he was much advanced in years. The latter, taking off his broad-brimmed white hat, crept carefully up to Victor’s bed, and, supporting himself on his cane, he stood looking at him intently. This man was older than he that was dying. In former times, in the midst of battles and conquests, he had been Victor’s brother-in-arms. Many years had passed, one by one their former companions had died, those sons of the Napoleonic wars, who had

divided with him the glory of danger and the glory of triumph, the few survivors from Russia scattered here and there, in cities and towns, poor, obscure, languishing in suffering or in want in antechambers, in offices, in huts, in byways—the last witnesses, or rather the living shadows of a glory in which perhaps the sons of our sons will not believe at all. Everything had passed away for these men of another era. What a medley of thoughts, at that hour, beside the bed of the dying, must have agitated the soul of Lorenzo, the old grenadier of the royal guard, come to salute for the last time this veteran friend of his!

It was not long before Victor, awaking, sighed painfully, and, opening his glassy and hollow eyes, he fixed them upon the face of the new comer, who stood motionless, gazing at him. With a sad smile, as if he were following a train of memory which had been awakened by his dream, he cried:

“Oh, Lorenzo, what beautiful days were those! Do you remember Imola on the banks of the Senio?”

“Do I remember it? It seems to me only yesterday. It was our first campaign, when we went as simple volunteers in the army of Italy,” replied the old grenadier with fire.

“It was in March of 'ninety-seven. I was thirty-five, the world—it seemed to be all mine,” the invalid continued sadly.

“I was nearly forty, but my heart was young,” answered the other. “Can’t you still see the day of the first battle, and that awful storm that arose in the night when we were on the borders of the river facing the enemy, who disputed its passage? There our legion saw war for the first time. But we didn’t yield a step, we—you remember?”

“Oh, yes, I can see that day and it almost seems that I am there now.”

“Our legion, in serried columns, received orders from

that devil Lahoz to charge with bayonets the Papal batteries. I don't know what happened to me that day, but fire and smoke and death no longer frightened me; like lions we rushed across and threw ourselves upon the muzzles of the guns. Tell me, don't you still hear ringing in your ears the words written in the orders of the day by the Great Man, those words that history never will wipe out?"

"Yes, yes!" said the sick man, "'That legion'—and he was speaking of us—'which saw war for the first time to-day, covered itself with glory.'"

"It captured," continued his friend, "forty pieces of artillery under the scathing fire of three or four thousand entrenched men."

The old grenadier wept, recalling the exploit of yore, and the dying veteran, turning back thirty years and more in his life, forgot his present ills, forgot the hour that was imminent. He stretched his right hand out from the coverings, and with a convulsive movement raised the sword which he had placed upon the bed: "From that day," he said, "our hearts, Lorenzo, were united, as my hand to this sword. And do you remember when our legion went from Rome to reënforce the corps of Guyeux, under Tagliamento? That is where we saw Bonaparte for the first time. He passed on horseback, near our ranks, in the midst of a black fog, his sword upraised, his hat cocked over his eyes, and his long hair streaming behind in the wind. 'Advance!' he cried, and passed on. We did not hold back; a shell bursts two feet in front of me; hit here in the arm by a burning splinter, I fall to earth; you lift me up, Lorenzo, and, supporting my weight, you see that I shall not be a laggard in the hour of victory! Ah, I too saw it that day! I too saw that banner planted at Isonzo! I can die content."

"And Gorizia!" Lorenzo continued, fired by the words of his old comrade and forgetting that this was his last

night on earth, "what a darkness of hell when we forced ourselves into the country, lighted only by the flashes from gun-shots, and put to the bayonet all who had not fled! And that poor mother, with two babes around her neck, I still see them in front of me weeping and embracing my knees, there on the steps of their ruined home! And San Daniello, and Osopo, and Gemoni!"

"I was in the vanguard," put in the sick man, "when we passed through the horrible gorges of the Tyrolese Alps. Hardly a quarter of an hour had elapsed when I found death in front of me, beside me, everywhere, and many did I see fall, struck by a bullet from an invisible musket, and crash headlong down precipices, their cries of despair answered by the joyous shouts of the mountaineers. Oh, I can hear him still, poor Antonio! my foster-brother, calling me by name in his downward plunge. Then, I confess it, I could not help looking back, and wiping away a tear on my sleeve. It was a compassion that soon passed. At the end of a week I was as used to such things as to a whiff of wind."

"That was proper. We had stout hearts, but not wicked ones; we thought ourselves incarnate demons. And the joy of being able to spare some one! More than a hundred times did I do this, and feel blessed. And you too, my own Victor, you had a good heart and a stout one."

"And that day when we thought we had lost everything for ever! When Napoleon had returned to France and had abandoned us Italians, and then had set out to seek glory in Egypt! And we? We became poor and useless, worse than ever. But this evil fate did not last long."

"And he came down the Alps like an avalanche, and on the second of June of the new century he entered Milan. Oh, the fields of Montebello and Marengo! Oh, days of glory, fled too quickly for us!"

Thus the two Napoleonic veterans, alone, in a wretch-

ed little room, in front of a little portrait of the Emperor hanging on the opposite wall, rehearsed that night the famous story of the warrior whose name, greater than that of any other, had run around the world. They talked also of Eylau and of Friedland, the anniversary of the battle of Marengo; Friedland, in which seventy thousand Russians were put to flight; and of Ulm, and Wagram, and Austerlitz; of Burgos, and Saragossa and Tarragona, where, though not for us, so much Italian blood was spilled. They recalled the snows of Russia, and the shores of the Moskowa, and the terrible day of Malo-Jaroslawetz, because it was there that the two old soldiers received on the field of battle the cross of honor and the rank of officers. Then, the firing of the Kremlin, and finally the fatal retreat from Moscow. They numbered upon their fingers those years that had melted away like snow; they repeated the names of the many heroes they had known; but when they mentioned the final happenings—Beauharnais, the siege of Mantua, and that last time when they saw the great man at St. Denys, words failed them.

They gazed into each other's face with excruciating pain, still keen after so many years, as if they remembered a recent wound. And they, who perhaps had never wept in their lives, now dropped a few silent tears.

But the face of the invalid, which had been covered with a terrible pallor, seemed now to be illumined with a feverish light, the continuous raising of his sheets seemed almost to reveal the beatings of his heart. In a body less worn by age, and by the long and hard labor of poverty, this sudden revulsion might haply have prolonged his life a little. But Victor was dying of that malady which afflicts so many of the poor, he was slowly wasting away as the effect of insufficient food and the hard struggle with daily needs; thus he had expended all the little vital force that remained to him in this last conversation with his former comrade-in-arms,

It was now late, and Damiano, who had hitherto remained a silent witness to this scene, had more than once attempted, but in vain, to interrupt the hot flow of moving words between the old men. He now once more approached the paternal bed. Finding that his father's memory was now clearer and livelier than ever, he had not had the heart to cut off the flow of his fancy; and now the light of joy he saw gleaming in the old man's face, gave him fresh hope, and he thanked Heaven with a grateful sigh.

But the old man, on his side, felt death fast approaching. Addressing himself to his friend and to his son, he succeeded in raising himself again on his elbow, and, forming his words with difficulty: "Now," he said, "I can go. I have saluted my friend, I have enjoyed one of my old hours. Remember your father, Damiano!" And other words of great significance came brokenly through his lips: "My name . . . my sword . . . Italian blood . . . swear, oh, my son!"

"Poor father!" cried the lad in a proud voice; "I know what you mean, and I swear!"

"Enough!" Victor replied. And presently, wandering among other thoughts, he said: "Who would ever have imagined that I, a Jacobin of 'ninety-six, would have ended in this way! . . . Better, if twenty years ago a cannon-ball had carried me off . . . But to see a priest beside me, a son at the foot of my bed . . . Oh, to die thus is too serious a matter . . ."

"But bear in mind, Victor," brusquely interrupted his old friend, "that in bed one does not die so quickly as in the front rank of a battalion. You are younger than I, and we may yet be able to drink together a few glasses to the memory of that"—

"Silence!" said the invalid, sternly. "Come here, Lorenzo, come closer; I have a request to make of you." And, opening his shirt, he drew out a little leather bag which hung upon his heart. "You remember it, Lo-

renzo? And I believe you must have its mate around your neck."

"Do I know it? It is our last treasure; it is a handful of the ashes of our old flag of the Guards, which we burned at Vimercate in 'fourteen, when they gave us notice that all was over. Oh, I remember it! You were the first to bring into the piazza an armful of dry branches and to set fire to them, crying that we had not surrendered our standards!"

"Yes, yes! So I leave you this single memento which I thought of carrying away with me; you have been my brother; I do not wish to quit you without leaving you any—Oh, the last survivor of us should be the custodian of this relic." And taking off the little bag of ashes, which for seventeen years had felt the beating of his heart, he placed it in the hand of his friend. Then, in a voice which ever became more broken, he said to Damiano, "Be sure to see that this cross of honor rests on my bosom even when I am buried. See that it is not taken from me when they carry me away, and put my sword, if you can, beside me. Thirty-five years has it accompanied me, but for you, at present, it is a useless weapon. Silence! Silence! do not awake either Teresa, or Celso, or poor Stella . . . and the Providence which sends them a little sleep . . . Farewell, Lorenzo! farewell, Damiano!"

"No, no, do not abandon me! The Lord will have pity on us!" interrupted the lad, in suffocating agony.

"What time is it?" asked the old man, raising himself to a sitting position for the last time.

"It is past midnight."

"All is well, Damiano. It is now the fifth of May; it is ten years since they have called him dead. I am glad that I myself will take my last step on the same day! Who knows whether I may not see him up there, where there is justice, where there is happiness for all?"

And he fell back, never to rise again. His shortness

of breath increased and in a few minutes the rattle in his throat, the fixity of his stare, the violent and continuous tremblings of his body, the coldness of his limbs, the dews of death announced to Damiano that the end was at hand, that at any moment he might no longer have a father. Lorenzo, a soldier who had seen a thousand deaths, trembled like a leaf at this sight, but he could not tear himself away from his friend's side. He deemed it his duty to do what he could for the bereaved family of his Victor. And, seeing that he was dying, he swore to himself that he would fulfil this sacred debt.

Just then Teresa and the children, waking from a short sleep, appeared suddenly in the room of the dying man. They ran toward him, called him sobbingly by name; he neither saw nor heard them, he answered nothing.

But Teresa, in the midst of her despair, did not lose her presence of mind; wringing Celso's hand she gave him a significant and sorrowful look. He understood her and ran out to call the priest.

In the rich man's hour of death upon his downy bed, the cold zeal of his household friends removes his nearest relatives; no one remains but a crew of greedy servants wondering what the master may have left to each, watching for the moment when they shall see him close his eyes, to pounce upon anything which the watchfulness of the presumptive heirs may have forgotten in wardrobes or bureaus; in that hour the man of social prominence, who during his lifetime has received the incense of flatterers, impostors, and parasites, sees them one after another leaving his bedside—the obsequious relative, the solicitous attorney, the inexorable lawyer, the inquisitorial notary with his last codicil, the alien figures of witnesses, all save the last priest who remains to recommend his soul to God. Do not, therefore, let it annoy you if I ask you to pause for a moment in the room of this poor father of a family, who was loved by his children in his lifetime, and is dying with them

around him. No one came to trouble him in the fulfilment of his last duties, no one to bear him away from that chamber, as bare and as cold as the tomb. This sorrow was only for them, and was their sole heritage. And they, too, wept in very truth, because on the morrow they would no longer possess him who for so long had held them together, who had shared with them home, bed, and board, and had counted as theirs alone the days of suffering and of joy, and would be forced to leave where they were, with little hope of well-doing, with no certainty of success to earn their daily bread in shop, in garret, in the fields, or on the highway.

The same priest who at sunset had brought the sacred *viaticum* to Victor's house, returned in the middle of the night, followed only by the old sacristan and by Celso. He brought with him his small vase of consecrated oil to perform over the dying man the mystery of extreme unction. Who can witness even once a sacrament, so solemn and so pious, of pardon and reconciliation, without adoring the mystery that joins body to soul and life to immortality?

With his *aspergium* of holy water, he blessed the bed and the people kneeling around it; then, raising his right hand over the dying man, the priest uttered the prayer of the ritual, "O God, Father Omnipotent, Father of Abraham, Father of Isaac, Father of Jacob, who dwellest in the highest and lookest down upon the humble, look upon this imposition of the hands which we are making on Thy servant, and these hands will have virtue upon his soul."

And after he had prayed, dipping his thumb in the holy oil, he made the sign of the cross upon the eyes, the ears, the mouth, the hands and the feet of the old man, praying each time that the mercy of the Lord might wipe out all traces of sin, and make this Christian soul worthy of its eternal destination.

Another hour elapsed. Still the priest did not leave the bedside, but began to read from the ritual the penitential psalms and the litanies of the Saints, while the prostrated family hardly dared to breathe, and sought not to disturb with sobs and cries the presence of the minister of God in that great moment.

But now, realizing that the last term of life was ended, the priest bent over the dying Victor and continued in a low and mild voice: "Farewell in Christ, peace be with you! Depart, O soul, from this world, in the name of God the Omnipotent Father, who created thee, in the name of the Son, who suffered for thee, in the name of the Holy Ghost, who descended upon thee, in the name of the saints and of the holy souls dear to God. To-day may thy place be in peace and thy dwelling in the celestial Jerusalem."

The agony of the old man grew ever more painful, it seemed as if death could not conquer a man hardened by so many trials. Motionless, his arms crossed over his breast, his brow dripping with perspiration, his pupils mistily staring in the black circle of his eyelids, with lips contracted, hands rigid, and all his body exhausted, he still maintained the struggle of spirit with flesh. But the minutes were passing; he had another thought for earth; he turned his eyes toward the corner in which he knew were the women of his household, and in that last glance he bade them farewell.

Teresa fell in a faint, and Stella gave a cry.

"Receive, O Lord," continued the priest, placing his hands upon the sorrowing ones, "the soul of Thy servant who comes to Thee from his pilgrimage; send Thy holy angels to meet him; may they teach him the way and open to him the gates of justice."

Victor's soul had fled. The minister of God still anointed him for a little longer, and then blessed the corpse. And Lorenzo, who, with his hat in his hand and leaning on his cane, had hidden himself behind the mem-

bers of the family, hardly knowing where he was, remembered then that he must be doing something. He raised from the ground, one after the other, the two poor women, and sustaining them as best he could, he led them away, repeating that he would give up to them the use of his only room.

They went out, but Damiano and Celso wished to remain near their father, in company with the sacristan.

The holy candle still burned. And very soon the first dawning of a beautiful and serene spring morning began to fill with rosy light the windows of the house, and the first ray of the sun which penetrated into that chamber of death fell upon the bed of the dead soldier of Napoleon.

It was the morning of the fifth of May.

CHAPTER III

THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY

THE day after Victor's death, Teresa and the children, deaf to all arguments, insisted on returning to their own home, looking upon it as almost a sacrilege that they had left it for even a brief time. The old lieutenant, Lorenzo, had made them welcome in his empty little room, but he fully understood that they remained there under protest, for the two women did nothing but sob and pray. Worse still, he could not persuade them to taste even a few spoonfuls of soup.

This weeping and this kissing of rosaries took all the spirit out of Lorenzo, who was always better versed in deeds than in words, but, good man that he was, his heart pitied them, and never before had he wished so much that he possessed a little wealth, so that he might say to the children of his friend, "Take this, consider it

your own." But, unable to do what he wished, he allowed the mother and daughter to leave, and even accompanied them himself to the lonely Via di Quadronno.

The house inhabited by Victor's family had not more than five rooms, narrow, damp and low-studded; two were on the ground floor, the kitchen, and a small bedroom occupied by Damiano and Celso, and three were on the story above. There was a small staircase, if one might call it such, then the chamber in which the veteran had died, next to that of Teresa, and at the back an alcove with a square dormer-window opening half way between the floor and the ceiling. Here Stella had slept her sleep of peace and innocence.

These rooms were poor and bare, but none the less clean; the sheets were white, but the coverings were few and worn. It was poverty, but not misery; poverty neither abject nor untidy, but carefully hidden under the order and symmetry with which the old family heirlooms had been arranged. The rough floor, the tables, the two wardrobes, the single mirror, and the little frame containing the portrait of Napoleon all appeared as clean and well-kept as on the day they had been brought into the house. But there was nothing redundant, nothing that suggested the shadow or the memory of more prosperous days.

The women, immediately on their entrance, set to work to put the house in order, as if nothing had happened. The old soldier's room alone was empty; no more were to be seen on the mantelpiece two silver candlesticks, the sole luxury of the family; they had served to pay the expenses of the modest funeral and of masses.

For twenty years they had dwelt in these quarters, resembling so many others, where the families of the people live when they earn their bread by honest work. These worthy and respected families form the greater part of our population; and among them are hidden many humble and true virtues, many sacrifices, many proofs

of courage, of honor, of suffering and of greatness. And so they grow up, to continue in the industries, in the arts, in commerce on a small scale, in the commonest and most necessary trades, many persons who during their whole lives may never see the sun except through the barred windows of foundries and offices, or from the thresholds of shops, or through the little green panes of their windows. Thus they are born and die, oppressed by the multitudes that surge around them, by the growing tyranny of their wants, consumed by the burden of many cares, their higher aspirations suffocated by the lack of space, of air, and of sky. Matured before their time by the sad necessity of suffering and holding their peace, there are men among them who might raise themselves with their fine minds to the highest truth and spill their blood for the good of others.

In the evening of that day when the family of Victor returned to their home, Teresa and her children were sitting silently in the paternal chamber, as in a sacred place. They had prayed together and exchanged a few whispered words, but without weeping, and they then felt that resigned calm, that consolation which accompanies prayers said in common.

These honest souls, new to the hard lessons of life, had not yet looked into the future. But Damiano pondered over it.

Damiano, who had now become the head of the house, was seated apart, his head resting on the back of his chair. He was tall and lithe in person and his posture at that moment was an *abandon* that was not in keeping with the vivacious expression of his eyes and with his pale and tranquil countenance. His black, lustrous hair shadowed his forehead. On his lips, barely surmounted with nascent down, glimmered the bitter and uncertain smile which might mean either the irony of grief or internal satisfaction at the ability to win the war of the soul. He was dressed in black. His clothes were mod-

est enough, but he wore them with an indescribable air of natural grace. His short coat, buttoned up to the collar, and his handkerchief knotted around his throat, emphasized the pallor of his face and the bitterness of his ineffable smile.

Damiano had barely reached his nineteenth year, for he was born in the year of the fatal expedition to Russia, or, more specifically, a month after his father had departed with the army. The father, though his moustache was already gray, had determined to take a wife when all the cannons of the kingdom, in March, 1811, announced that an heir had been born to the Emperor. But the good veteran had exchanged for hard marches amid northern snows the happiness of taking into his arms his own newly-born first-begotten child. That child, grown into an ardent, adventurous boy, had been Victor's consolation in the tedious days when, the scene having shifted, he began to look back regretfully on the past. Now the boy was no longer what he had been; he had become a man.

That evening he was thinking over many things which for the first time appeared clear to his mind. He saw the future of his mother, of his sister, of his younger brother, he saw those lives so dear to him, clinging to such far-away and uncertain hopes! And then the growing cares which made it necessary to minimize, as far as possible, the daily expenditures of the family; the goad of certain old debts which had been contracted by his father in the days of sorest poverty in order to provide for the early education of himself and Celso; the obligation, which seemed to him sacred, of hiding from the others, at least for a time, the knowledge of the straits to which they were reduced; and the memory of his father's stainless name; the difficulty of finding immediately a means of livelihood, without throwing himself, as he feared he might be compelled to do, into the first trade that offered; and, in addition, the explanations

that must be made to the officials, who had already begun the legal preliminaries for exposing to the orphan's court the financial condition of the family; but, above all, the thought of the morrow, obscure, inexorable—which repeated to him, "You must earn your bread!"—these sorrows and many others weighed upon his soul.

His mother, a good and simple woman, who found her all in this world in her husband and her children, and had loved, hoped, and lived in them alone, seemed to expect to find in Damiano the strength she no longer found in herself. Pressing to her bosom the graceful head of Stella, who, sitting beside her on a bench, had leaned over to her in childish fashion, the poor mother questioned Damiano with eloquent eyes.

But the youth, although he had lost not a single hour, and was already maturing his plans in his head, had not the heart to speak of them at that moment. He said only that people who were born poor should not blush to be what God had made them. Shortly afterward he added that he had talked at length that morning with Signor Lorenzo, their only remaining friend, and that some sacrifice must be made, first of all, perhaps, that of giving up the house in which they had lived so many years happily enough in their poverty.

Celso and Stella bowed their heads, but Teresa—who had borne her three children under that roof, who had seen her protector and her friend die in that room, and who had hoped that here she too might close her eyes forever—Teresa felt a pain shoot through her heart, and broke out:

"Oh, no! Damiano, let me die here!"

Nothing more was said all the evening. But when they separated for the night, the mother held Stella close to her, while Damiano and his brother sat up until morning in the room on the ground floor, seeking to supply each other with what courage it is possible to find when one is twenty and at the same time poor.

CHAPTER IV

A FRIEND INDEED

SIGNOR LORENZO called the next morning, according to his promise to Damiano. And when they had all assembled in the second-story parlor, he and the young man exchanged significant glances, as if each wished the other to introduce the important subject.

The mother, conscious at last of this mutual embarrassment, said: "Come, Signor Lorenzo, I know already that you come to me with bad news, but I am prepared for anything. Speak, say what you have to say, since Damiano has not the heart to do so."

Then the old soldier, seeking for the remains of the courage of that time when at the head of a valorous troop he had hurled himself in assault upon a block-house in Spain, or stood firm before the attack of a column of Cossacks at Smolensk or Borodino, lowered his eyes and replied:

"Dear friends, old as I am, I would more willingly face the mouth of a cannon, with my musket on my arm and my knapsack at my feet, than be here now, before you, who are the soul and the blood of my brother. But because it must be my affair, as I have foreseen for a long time, to assist you in this sad hour, be patient if I speak to you plainly, but as an honest man I have already talked with Damiano. It is a pity that these are hard times for him. But, after all, even that man, the great Napoleon, who held all the world in the hollow of his hand, even he fell. And what can you do, poor children, who never even saw him?"

"He who has a heart has arms, and is always master of his fate in this world," Damiano replied briskly.

"And who loves his own will always find some little good to do," added Stella with angelic ingenuousness.

"Beloved, both of you! You are right! I have said a hundred times to that good man who has just left us, to join the company of our former brethren-in-arms, that he should think of giving a trade to his sons, some good trade, so that they never should lack the means of making a livelihood; for he who works is always master of his own labor, even more so perhaps than the rich man is of his affairs; and the bread of labor is the most appetizing, the most honorable of all. But he would hear nothing of this. I know only too well that that cross of honor had somewhat inflated his ideas, and he did not wish that the sons of a knight should learn to use the trowel or the plane. I sympathize with him. But I too received the cross; I received it the same day that he did, and I prize it as much as is becoming. It lies at the bottom of a chest, and I do not display it to the eyes of others except on the day that you know. As to the rest, what matters it? Let us say no more now about decorations; they are bits of gilded tin and nothing more. Who pays any attention to them nowadays? But this is not what we must speak about."

"Oh, Signor Lorenzo, do not keep me any longer in suspense; tell me rather what I ought to do," urged Teresa, almost weeping.

"I was just about to say that we must think of our own affairs," he resumed. "You are a fine woman, but there are certain things women do not understand, and should not understand. Now I must tell you about them, I, who yesterday morning with Damiano gathered and read the papers left by your husband, before consigning them to that waxen-faced official who came here to nose around everywhere, and who aroused in me an inexpressible irritation. All the same, I supposed—I hoped that—Listen to me! To speak frankly, you have nothing. Victor always had the large heart of the soldier, he believed too readily in the honesty of men, and in their honor, all very fine things, but"—

"Poor man!" sighed Teresa. "Oh, if everyone were like him."

"You will find none like him. But it is true that he thought little of the morrow. Among his papers, which, for more security, I submitted to a lawyer, an old friend of mine, we found, amid bulletins of past wars such as we shall never see again, sundry accounts, sundry worn receipts for moneys expended in forage and other military services, in the times when our country began to get warm. They are old papers of 'ninety-six, which he had obtained from your grandfather, good soul, who in those times also had lands under the sun. And I knew him, you see, your grandfather, who might then have been about your age . . . But who would have imagined he would finish in this manner?"

Contrary to his custom, the old soldier sought by the use of many words to break the force of the announcement of their poverty to his friends, and he divagated into all sorts of reminiscences of the past.

"Come, speak up, Signor Lorenzo," said Damiano with some impatience.

"Yes! yes! In those days, dear boy, I also had fire in my veins like you. Well, your father, as it seems, never thought of cashing these papers which might possibly have brought him a thousand lire; and now I fear they are good only for the pipe. And it cannot be otherwise; would you wish that the generation of to-day should pay the expenses of yesterday? Therefore from this side nothing is to be expected. A few small debts remain, which I will attend to myself. It is the least I can do for my friend. I confess that my heart bleeds for you. I am poor myself, though I never felt so before; but now I feel sorrow for it and almost shame. Oh, if I only had the coffers of those solemn-faced prigs whom I once knew and who to-day know me no longer; those foxes that cried louder than all the others and afterward, as the saying is, made the Saint John of the four faces.

But I, no! I and Victor, no! Better live on bread and water! Have we not gnawed the hoofs of horses, in that cursed country?"

"Virtue costs tears and blood," cried Damiano, as if speaking to himself.

"Poor father!" sighed Stella.

"Even your pension," continued Lorenzo, "those three hundred francs a year, for your father's cross of honor, comes to an end. After his death you receive nothing further. Then, what is there for you to do? None of you has any practical knowledge, you know no handicraft; you, Teresa, and that angel of a daughter of yours, I know well how you have continually put away the little savings from the work you did in secret, but in Victor's last illness, what with the doctor, the chemist and the priest, they have all disappeared. Damiano is a clever boy and means well; Celso is young and not in very good health, but he wishes to study, and that he shall do. Not all the good people are dead, and with God's help we will find some of them to help you. Tell me, Signora Teresa, have you no relatives, either near or distant?"

"I have an old cousin, son of the brother of my mother, who has a large chemist's shop, not far from the Piazza Fontana. He has made a fortune, so they tell me, and he also has his own house here in Milan. He has lost his wife, but he has a son."

"Excellent!" said the old soldier. "If they have not hearts of flint"—

"But it is years and years since I have seen them, these cousins. They are rich and they never have taken the trouble to find us. My Victor was poor, but unused to bowing the head to anybody, whoever he might be, he never sought them. That blessed man never would be indebted to anyone."

"You tell me that? Don't you think that I know it?" interrupted Lorenzo. "Why is it that we, he and I, re-

mained simple soldiers, up to almost the last year of our great hero's life? Because we would never be indebted to anyone. For that was the time when a general used to clasp the hand of the meanest soldier as if he were a brother. But now let us think about yourself. Yes, it would be well if you should try your luck with your relative."

"Lord in Heaven!" exclaimed the widow, "he would not be willing to see me. If you only knew what sort of man he is!"

"We will go together, mamma," Stella broke in, with much emotion. "I feel that I should have courage to speak to him."

"You can attempt it," said Damiano, "but it will be of no use. A man who for so long a time did not care to know whether we were alive or not—is it likely that he would suddenly feel the counsels of compassion, the desire to do good? And then to humiliate yourself, to pray, to hear yourself saying words which make you cast your eyes on the ground, with blushes on your cheek, and hell in your heart! For my part—but no, do not heed me; we must do as all others do who are poor; we must bow our heads and be silent. Perhaps God keeps an account of all this."

"Do not talk in this way, Damiano, my good Damiano!" interrupted his sister. "Remember that our father still hears what we say, and if you give us no courage, what can we do without you?"

"You are right," resumed the lad, his soul suddenly flashing in his eyes. "We shall always remain united, each will work for all, your simple and lovely faith will always supply me with the virtue that I lack. Something must be decided upon, so let us decide as soon as possible. We have no longer anything to pay for the rent of this house, which swallowed up our father's entire pension; we must find some other shelter. Two rooms are enough for us; peace and patience will make us love them."

"Listen, children," said the veteran, who had been debating matters within himself; "if you wish, we can make our home together; either you may come to me, or I will go to you. It is true I am a little bit cramped myself; besides my pension from the cross, and another hundred lire which I enjoy from an annuity which I bought ten years ago, I have nothing in the world. I cannot work; I am too old; but what is mine is yours."

"No, no, never!" said Damiano, firmly. "If the hour of need arrives you shall be our second father; but there are many poorer than we. We are young and strong; don't you think we can find some means of livelihood?"

"Spirited boy! let your old friend embrace you!" Lorenzo approached the lad, and with great affection pressed him to his heart.

"We will find a house," continued Damiano, "near the heart of the city; rents there are a little higher, to be sure, but it will be easier to find work there. I have nearly finished my studies in school, and when the year ends I can set myself to learn a trade, or an art, or a business of some sort. Meanwhile I have been recommended to an excellent person who has given me some clerical work to do in his shop. You see, Signor Lorenzo, that I have lost no time."

"And we, too, will work, won't we, mamma?" put in Stella, expressing in her candid face all the truth that was in her heart. "I know how to embroider, and when we are in our new house I shall sit all day long by the work-table; Damiano will seek customers for me, and if I get work, we shall not need to ask charity."

"And I," said the widow in her turn, "do I not know a good many persons who might help us? The rector of San Celso and the curate of San Colimero sympathize with me in their goodness, and often have deigned to speak to me. They are well known men; they have friends among the most distinguished gentlemen of Milan; and who knows"—

"Yes, as you will, mamma, but let us seek to aid ourselves as much as we can, and it will be better."

This interruption came from Damiano, who knew his mother's weakness, an undue reverence for priests and aristocrats.

"Bravo!" exclaimed Lorenzo, "that is how your father would have talked."

Damiano bowed his head. The old soldier, rising to his feet, now prepared to leave.

"Always remember your old comrade, boys. He is now nothing more than a rusty old fellow, condemned to pull the boat, but so long as he has breath he will always be your comrade."

Saying this, the old soldier pulled his hat over his brows, took his cane, and mumbling to himself to hide a secret spasm, of which he was ashamed, he took his leave. He had not wept the other time when he left the house, after witnessing the death of his last comrade-in-arms; but now, hardly had he reached the street when, glancing backward, he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, and said, "It is finished. I am not what I was."

CHAPTER V

THE NEW HOME

IN his study on the ground floor, Signor Domenico, an aged dealer in drugs and colonial wares, was seated in an ample leather armchair, his elbows leaning on the enormous ledger laid out on the desk behind a bulwark of piled-up merchandise, of labeled casks and barrels, and almost hidden by a heap of imposing-looking books and the mass of papers and accounts which encircled him like a wall.

One of his clerks, his pen perched behind his ear, and

his spectacles raised upon his forehead like a lifted visor, emerged from the shop and crossed the little portico to announce to his principal that two women, one young and the other old, who called themselves relatives of his, asked the favor of a word with him.

"Who are they?" asked the shopkeeper, without raising his eyes from the ledger. He had hardly heard the name when he growled, "I have no relatives of that name; don't bother me about them."

"Still"—said the clerk.

"Don't bother me!" repeated the angry old man. But the two women had already come forward, and the voice of Teresa was heard.

"Excuse me, Signor Domenico, excuse me a little, if I presume to call in this manner; but I hope that among relatives"—

"Who is it?" asked the shopkeeper, and a head covered with an old cap of green felt was thrust over the barricade of his big books.

"It is I, it is Teresa, wife of the Cavaliere Víctor. Don't you remember, Signor Domenico? We are cousins; my poor mother was the sister of your father."

"Ugh!" growled the old man.

Teresa felt her heart fail her, and Stella had hardly dared to raise her eyes. The reception accorded them by this man, who now set himself to scolding at the employés, who fled hither and thither, as if neither mother nor daughter were there, filled the girl with embarrassment and even fear. More than everything else, a continual wheezing, which seemed to aid his stertorous and wrathful breathing, struck wonder and horror to their hearts.

None the less when Domenico, seeing that they did not intend to go so soon, turned toward them to ask brusquely what they wanted, the two approached closer, and first one and then the other took up the story of their misfortunes, and how they had decided to come to him

as the last relative remaining to them. Once started, it was difficult for Teresa to stop; she told all about her Victor, who had been dead for a month; of his last painful illness, which had consumed all their savings; of the necessity in which they found themselves to work for a living, of their resolution to leave their old house, because it was too large, and the rent was above their means; lastly, of their intention of moving to this central quarter of the city, if they could find, somewhere in the neighborhood, at a lower rental, two rooms on the third or fourth floor. She concluded: "Signor Domenico, we are children of brother and sister; you ought to help us, or at least to tell us what we can do."

"Eh! Eh! Eh!" answered the shopkeeper, with a dry little cough, "we may be cousins, as you say, but I say that we never have known each other; it is certainly a good twenty years since I had the honor of seeing your cavaliere, who—from what has been told me—was always a madcap and a dangerous person. Therefore, what do you expect me to do?"

Following this train of thought, he added that their relationship was such as did not carry any duties with it; that he was extremely sorry to hear of the condition of the family, and that he had every willingness to do something for them if he could. Pausing a moment and shaking his head, he continued by explaining that he also had a son upon whom, wishing to give the boy a name and a position, it was necessary he should lavish his money, so that he found himself in a sea of debts, and must look first to his own. Nor did he hesitate to add that they had done wrong in mentioning his name to the officials of the tribunal, as their only relative, because he never could be induced to be either guardian or joint-guardian for any of them. For all these reasons, he added that commerce was an abyss, on the edge of which it did not pay to walk with closed eyes; he himself, whatever evil tongues might say to the contrary, was a poor

man; at that very moment he found himself more than ever involved in risky speculations; failures were occurring on all sides; that very morning advices had come to him of the failure of one of his correspondents in *Marseilles*; from all which he concluded that he could not with propriety do what he would wish to do for them.

You may well imagine how these cold and miserly words stabbed *Teresa* and *Stella* to the heart. The widow, fearing that he might continue to run on still longer with his excuses, hastened to find some apology, and said that she desired nothing more than to be directed to some honest person in the neighborhood, who could rent them, for a low price, the two rooms they had already set out to seek. Then the old cousin, seeing he could get out of the matter so easily, made many promises: he would make inquiries, he would keep them in mind, and so on. Then he repented, as he remembered that this would serve them as an excuse for calling again, and so he added:

"Wait, I have in mind the very house for you! I know *Signor Pietro*, who sublets many houses of the sort in this neighborhood. I will send you to him, and I am sure that he will accommodate you. Hey, there, *Signor Dazio*!"

The clerk who had appeared a little earlier with his pen behind his ear, and his spectacles thrust upward on his forehead, came running to the threshold of the office.

"Take these ladies," said his employer, "to *Signor Pietro* in my name, and tell him to do all he can for them. For the rest, I am extremely sorry, *Signora Teresa*"—and from his bald head he removed his felt cap—"but it will be useless for you to trouble yourself to return here; my business keeps me occupied morning and night, and I have no time and no money to throw away. I am a poor man—your most humble servant!"

Mother and daughter left him without another word, sadder than before they had come. But as it was on their way, they did not omit to examine the rooms which

Signor Pietro, when he knew that they came with a recommendation from the rich chemist, wished to show them in person, praising them the while as if they were part of a palace suite. Next morning the widow returned with Damiano. Two rooms on the fourth floor were vacant, and the landlord of the house in the Via Quadranno, though it was a little past Easter, willingly allowed his tenants to leave. But his blood froze at the thought of losing the half yearly payment not yet made.

So they speedily transferred their patronage to their new landlord, who, out of pure regard to Signor Domenico, expressed himself content with the rent of one hundred and fifty lire a year. With the proceeds of the sale of their extra coverlets, which they disposed of to a second-hand dealer near San Celso, they paid their half-yearly rent in advance, and shortly afterward the poor and honest family moved into their new home. It was with much sorrow that Teresa and her daughter quitted the lonely house where they had passed so many years; which appeared to them in the retrospect to have been only too happy, and where they left behind them many little memories, many lively hopes.

The two rooms were on the highest floor of a long house which faced the Piazza Fontana, where a hundred families of the people came and went, and hid their poverty and their fatigues, their needs and their vices. No one took any notice of the new neighbors in the house. Meanwhile the two women, with that natural sense of order and economy which in minds contented with little tempers suffering in the days of adversity and bestows a certain high-mindedness in misfortune, had discovered the secret of giving to their little apartment an appearance of gracious homelikeness and simplicity. Each room had a door and a barred window which gave upon a long external passage-way above the court. On the other side, in each room, was a larger window which looked down upon the public street.

In the first and smaller apartment nothing was to be seen but two beds, one opposite the other, in the two corners at the left of the entrance. These were occupied by Damiano and his brother. The second room, a little larger, had an alcove at one end, and opposite this was a chimney with a high and narrow fireplace, like all the chimneys of the poor. Under the window that faced the court was a small oven; near the other, which looked down upon the street, might always be seen a little table and Stella's loom, well furnished with millinery of various sorts, and with work for the needle or the shuttle. In this corner mother and daughter passed the whole day. Near the alcove was Teresa's bed. Stella's, smaller and lower, was in the other corner, behind a white curtain which during the day concealed it.

Little more than a month had passed, but in that brief space the two women, without losing any time, had secured the patronage of a good and fashionable milliner in the nearby Piazza del Duomo, and hoping that this custom would attract that of others, they expected to be able to live without depending on charity. Thus, little by little, they cheerfully gave themselves up to the assiduous and obscure toil of the mothers and sisters of the people, which at the same time sustains and mows down the lives of so many human creatures who pass away without ever having asked the reason of their existence.

CHAPTER VI

THE DREAM OF YOUTH

DAMIANO, not yet arrived at his twentieth year, that splendid period of courage and hope, already felt himself master of his own heart, and looked upon life with a mild and serious eye and also joyously obeyed the last instructions of his

father. He loved his mother and his sister so well that the voice of love was for him the voice of duty.

But if, in the ardent confidence of a soul full of thoughts and entirely inexperienced, he had sworn in his heart to succeed at something very soon, for the sake of himself and his, none the less, the uncertainty of his outlook, in face of the first anxieties, the very hopes which, when want stares one in the face, weary and embitter even the years of a thoughtful youth, in short, the necessity of renewing every day the secret conflict with oneself and with one's environments, the feeling that his arms were weakening, that he was still at the beginning of life—all this had aroused in him the first torments of doubt, a precocious melancholy which made him presage evil, seek solitude, and experience the necessity of serious meditation, to suffocate those germs of wrath that would spring up in his inner heart, and to keep loyal to his promise, without cursing men and life.

By nature he had been endowed with a noble soul, a frank and liberal mind. Nurtured from his childhood on the strong and generous speech of his father, he had begun by loving everything that was great or beautiful which invaded his intellect or his heart. The simple and wonderful tales of his father and Signor Lorenzo, his comrade, those heroic deeds in which the two old soldiers had borne not the least distinguished part, those stories of dangers, of battles, of triumphs, those rapid mutations of men and things to which he could not help surrendering his youthful imagination, had early raised in him thoughts of greatness, of honor and of glory; and he had decided that man, if he wills, is always the arbiter of his own destiny. He had abandoned himself to the unthinking faith of adolescence, which desires, yearns, and dreams, finding itself, as it were, in a joyous garden, out of which lead all the paths of life, and knowing not which to take, for all seem short and easy; but believing that whichever he selects he will reach a high goal.

It is true that he had remained a child for only a few years. At twelve, no longer as audacious and adventurous as he had been, he had begun to think what he would do when he became a man, and he began to show in his bearing and in his dress a calm serenity, a modest reserve rarely to be met with save in those who from the beginning feel capable of good work. At that age, in obedience to his father's wish, he attended the public school in the gymnasium, and, in the midst of the numerous, irrepressible band of students, he had deliberately set himself to spell out in miniature what was a close approximate to the world writ large. In the subdued chatter of the school-benches, and the insolent uproar of the recreation hour in the school-yard, he could distinguish for himself the petty rivalries, the friendships and the enmities; he found tranquil and solitary souls, and hearts already full of malice and venom. He saw the intrigues of mediocrity, the effrontery of wickedness, all the good and bad emotions which struggled and mingled in them. And he had decided that such must be society, in which love and hate, virtue and vice continually warred with one another.

Thus at this time he had few friends even among his schoolfellows, but to those few he had bound himself in fraternal love, and during the hours when he was free, especially Thursdays and Sundays, he was accustomed to associate with one or another of them, going over their common studies, reading together, with great joy, the few books that they were able to find, copying or committing to memory the finest pages of such of our poets as fell into their hands. The marvelous enchantment of the latter they felt without having it pointed out to them, and they would exult over them and weep, they would have long talks together, these poor and honest lads—their fresh, and serene imaginations soaring in the paradise of poetry, which was a ray of beauty that reflected itself in their hearts.

It was just at this time that Damiano began to feel kindest, above all his companions, to a lad a little older than himself, the son of a painter, and often, when he was at leisure, he passed long hours in the house of this friend. The painter like many other honest folk lived in the attic; he was not a genius, but he understood his art; he loved it, and because of this love he never had turned it into a mere trade. That was the reason why he was poor.

In the studio of this honest and unknown artist, the young Damiano felt a strange disturbance, half sweet, half bitter, inexpressible, never before experienced; it was the vague yearning for beauty and for virtue, which had invisibly possessed his earlier years, and which now began to clothe itself in form and speech. He could not tear himself away from the easel of his good friend Signor Costanzo, for such was the name of the painter. Standing beside him, the lad would look on while the latter silently painted a head of the Madonna for some country church, or a portrait of one of the defunct benefactors of the Hospital Maggiore, for such are the subjects that come within the expectation of our humbler artists. Occasionally he would ask for the secret of spreading the colors on the palette, or with a piece of crayon and a fragment of cardboard he would place himself behind the easel to portray in his own way some of those clay busts modeled from the antique which were ranged here and there around the room. The painter allowed him to do as he pleased. Nevertheless, when he glanced at these ingenuous sketches, the first efforts of a childish hand, he wondered at discovering, in a certain neatness of execution, a certain harmony of lines, the natural inclination of the lad toward the sublime in Art, the favorite child of the Italian sky.

So, enamored as he himself was of this art, the painter undertook to teach Damiano drawing. It was a holiday for the lad to run here in every free hour, and he en-

deavored to respond to the pains taken by the good man, who soon became aware that in this tender heart was already alight the vivifying flame of genius. But, abased in his own obscurity, alone in his attic, and continually in the grasp of poverty, the painter felt together with this joy a sense of pain and discomfort; and, thinking over this virginal soul that also wished to raise itself into the heaven of creative work, he was fain to look back upon his own past. Thinking on his own fate, he feared that to lead this lad to the same path would be only to make one unfortunate the more. At last he thought it would be well to consult with Damiano's father.

To old Victor the painter's proposition to teach his son art seemed a species of insanity, for he held the opinion that the reign of the sciences and the arts was finished with Napoleon's era, if not everywhere, at least in Italy. And, thinking that it would certainly be better to become a reasonable and sensible bank clerk, or something of that sort, than a poor scientist or an obscure painter, he would not listen to his son's entering the school of the Academy, but resolved instead that as soon as he had finished his course in the lyceum, like other boys, he should place himself in some smoother beaten track. So there was no further talk of painting or of poetry.

Nevertheless, Damiano continued in secret to visit the studio of his friend and master. That first love of art grew daily in him, and little by little became his sigh, his secret. He would sit up at night, drawing by the light of a candle, or rise at dawn, to consecrate the first hours of the morning to his mysterious task, giving concrete form to the dreams of his youthful soul, forgetting everything else in those enchanted hours. But an unforeseen accident supervened—one of those accidents that leave an impress in the mind of youth that can never be effaced. Death came to snatch away from him his one faithful companion, the son of the painter Costanzo. This bereavement threw him into a profound melancholy, and

many months passed before he could again think of isolating himself in his room, to draw upon scattered leaves, as formerly, aerial figures and fantastic groups, or to re-read some pages of Virgil, or Dante, Ariosto, or Tasso, which comprised his entire library.

In his first grief, feeling almost as if his mind had been obscured forever, he had made a vow to sacrifice to his lost companion the dearest dream of his thoughts. He drew no longer, and seldom did he allow himself to be seen in the rooms of the old painter, who on his side was inconsolable in losing not only one but two sons at one time. In that interval Damiano felt again a warm desire for severer studies. In the year that preceded the death of his poor father he had begun to attend the public lyceum, and the new word of science moved him profoundly. He studied assiduously for many months, not without exciting the grave fears of his family that he might fall ill. He believed and loved, he had begun to perceive truth under the resplendent form of the beautiful, and he soon gave evidence that his mind was not one that would fall backward in following the march of science. He felt himself awed and almost overwhelmed by that immense mystery of humanity and of the universe which now for the first time he was called upon to face. He found himself lost on a vast plain, misty, interminable, over which he passed without knowing whether the sun were before him or behind. None the less he felt that there was some reason for life, the life which formerly had seemed to him so much easier and more beautiful.

Around him he saw many of his own contemporaries, fellow-countrymen and fellow-students, whom he gladly would have embraced and loved, not merely as companions but as brothers. Some of these belonged to illustrious houses, and were in good places of employment, or were rich enough to have no fear for the future; but the greater part were in circumstances similar to or little

better than his own. Many were careless or fastidiously indifferent; others were reckless, and only a few felt themselves impelled to seek in the lessons of the past a treasury of virtue for the future, to prepare their minds and their consciences for the hard trials of life, to be able to say with justice to their nearest relatives: "I, too, am a man, and am here with you and for you!"

The youths whose friendship Damiano craved, or whose company he sought, hardly looked at him or else made sport of him, of his pedantic notions and his melancholy; they even laughed at his poverty. They let him creep away close to the walls of the street with a book under his arm, while they, twirling their canes, went the rounds with cigars in their mouths and hats cocked on the side of the head; or else they stood in the doorway of cafés discussing their first conquests—ballet-girls or chorus girls or circus equestriennes. Damiano would walk back home with bowed head and wounded heart. The poetic dreams of the art that he still loved in secret would take flight, and he said: "I never shall be anybody."

Thus in his early youth, Damiano had felt, almost without knowing it, the influx of that fatal malady of the century, the torment of doubt. And for this reason, in his most anguished hour, in the night which he passed beside the death-bed of his father, his brow had been bent under the weight of the bitterest thoughts, his soul had fallen prostrate at the idea that henceforth the family would have no helper or comforter but him alone, who could find neither help nor comfort for himself.

But in the solemn moment of misfortune, at the very time when shallow souls would seem to find their comfort in despairing and cursing, simple ones feel instead a renewal of the great pure forces of life. Damiano's heart was stirred to its depths; a new virtue, the energy of real grief gave him new life.

Having rendered the last offices of love to his father,

bid farewell to youthful fancies, and turned a peaceful gaze toward the future, Damiano clearly recognized the duty that lay before him; he knew what there was for him to do, and he accepted his destiny. Discontent with himself, uncertainty as to his vocation, the *ennui* of weariness which poisons the sweets of study and disturbs our best years, even the contempt for the opinions and doings of others, all the storms of a young and sensitive heart were stifled in him from that day. The feeling of impotence, the shame and the sordid resignation of poverty had given place to strong and loyal affections, the future promised him consolation and reward, and he began with joy to live again. Sorrow for the father he had lost remained in his heart and was hidden there as a sacred treasure, but it was the right and useful sorrow which teaches not how to despair but how to fight. From that hour was re-born the love of the art in which he had taken the first steps; from that hour he turned back to the chosen studies, to the beloved volumes which had taught him the eternal beauty of thought, and he said to himself: "The little that I can do I must not allow to be lost. I will consecrate my strength to those beings who in order to live have need of my courage, of my love; and their love and the consciousness of having deserved it will be my reward!"

With this worthy object he had continued cheerfully to attend the lyceum school, so that he should not miss, when occasion arose, that first step to some obscure and little sought employment. Meanwhile he returned ever more frequently to the home of his old friend, the painter Costanzo, who, more benevolent and generous in his obscurity than many others would be in the proudest prosperity, offered willingly to instruct him in painting. Damiano realized the uncertainty of the issue; none the less he could not renounce this dear temptation.

"I will complete these two years of study," he said to himself, "and then either the art that I love, or some

other humble avocation to which I shall submit myself with courage, will gain me bread. And who knows whether existence may not again become joyous and beautiful, for me and for those dear ones who make with me the journey of life. After all, there are many people much more unhappy than we, and still they live and deserve to live. Besides, we live in a time when even the poor man has a loud and potent voice, a voice that is beginning to be heard everywhere. Say what we will," he concluded, "justice is uniform and what is true is true."

So thought our Damiano. And for several months, during which the family dwelt in their new quarters he continued with an alert mind to pursue this life of study and work. The veteran, Lorenzo, who had not forgotten him, had looked around at once and had been able to recommend him to a dealer in woollen drapery, a man of means who had consented to take the lad into his shop as a clerk, to keep his books. This task, which was somewhat tedious, cost Damiano three or four hours every evening, but it brought him in two hundred and eighty lire a year, and in his present straitened circumstances this sum was very welcome, sufficing for the rent of the rooms and leaving a small balance for his clothes, which were humble enough but decent and well-fitting, so that his general aspect was neat and attractive.

When he returned home at night, he would read or write by himself, until quite late; then, after a few hours of sleep, he would rise in the early morning to run over to the studio of the painter Costanzo, who loved him more and more every day, and lavished on him all the affection he had felt for the son who had been snatched away from him. Thence, at the striking of the hour, he would hurry away to the lyceum so as not to miss his lessons. Caring no more for the unbridled license of his fellows, he held himself apart, self centered, and anxious to penetrate into the secrets of nature, which the monot-

onous voice of the teacher could not quite explain to him.

The two women always remained at home; they worked until night and they seldom saw any stranger. Their sole companion was Lorenzo, the old soldier, who would come two or three times a week, happy in the long evenings to be able to tell stories of his own time to Stella and to Celso. Though he had a preference for Damiano, the good man wished well to the other lad; he often wondered what could be done with him, without ever finding anything that would suit him. The mother thought of this still more. One evening, during one of those long silences which seem to invest a small gathering of people with an air of mistrust if not of suspicion, the good woman found courage to say:

"Do you know, Signor Lorenzo, my Celso wishes to become a priest; he has had this desire for quite a little time, and as for me, I hold it to be a real blessing from the Lord."

The old Cisalpine straightened himself up; a sound escaped him as if he were smothering an oath, and he looked the boy square in the face. The latter blushed, inclined his head, and knew not what to say.

Damiano had not yet returned home. So the conversation dropped. But as Lorenzo rose to leave, in saluting the widow he said a little brusquely:

"As to your son, if he wishes to become a priest let him become one; it is possible he may be an honest one. But don't seek any advice from me one way or the other; leave me out of the matter entirely."

Thus he took his leave, without waiting for Damiano, as was his custom.

Celso was then seventeen years old but, weak and slender from infancy, he had grown little in his limbs, so that he hardly seemed to be fifteen. He had come into the world in a year of sorrow and anxiety for Teresa, a year of which neither she nor Victor had been able to speak without tears, that which saw the ruin of Napoleon,

and the end of the past. Victor held his eldest born, Damiano, dearer than his other children. He used to say that this boy was born in his better days, when there was still an Italy. On the other hand, the good Teresa could not in this manner measure her love, and she compensated her other son, the poor weakling, with a livelier solicitude, with that kind of loving jealousy which is known only to mothers.

When Celso was ten years old, he fell ill of a slow fever. Confined to his bed for many months, and hanging between life and death, he had no other doctor, no other saving angel, than his mother. The pious and simple woman, amid the anguish of seeing her dear one languishing of consumption, made a vow in her heart that if the Lord would restore her child to her she would do her best to consecrate him to His holy service. It might have been a hazardous vow, a useless vow, but it really seemed like an inspiration from above. For the child, recovering almost miraculously, showed with his growing years a quiet soul directed toward religious thoughts; and without any instructions from his mother he crept secretly almost every day to the church of the saint whose name he bore. He loved above everything the splendid ceremonies of Sunday and of the solemn festivals of the Madonna; he was retiring, studious, exemplary, though his timidity and his silence had often annoyed old Victor, who apparently could not recognize anything of himself in him. The lad had not the courage to open his heart to any of his own people, but the mother could guess his thoughts, so that, timid herself as he, she rejoiced and trembled at the same time; so, until the end of her husband's life, fearing repulse or anger, as he had other intentions for his children, she never found an opportunity of speaking to him about Celso's vocation.

After the old soldier's death, the widow had consulted with her father confessor, and brought him her son,

who had finally expressed his own wish to assume the clerical garb, adding also that, at the death-bed of his father, he had fancied he heard again the voice of Heaven calling to him. Mamma Teresa wept with joy, thanking God; and the priest, recognizing the excellent disposition of the boy, deemed it wise and just that he should begin to think of his future, and promised to recommend him, so that he might obtain some small benefice, by means of which he could continue his studies after receiving his license, and enter the seminary without further sacrifices on the part of his family. The same morning the mother spoke of the matter to Damiano, who, although he would have wished that his brother should deliberate a little longer before arriving at any decision on so serious a matter, nevertheless did not know how to gainsay his ardent desire, and the still more ardent desire of his mother. So he proffered his savings for the last few months, to meet the first necessary expenses. And even from their comrade Lorenzo they had had some hopes of assistance, but after the brusque words he had uttered on hearing that Celso wished to become a priest, no one ever addressed him again on that subject.

CHAPTER VII

A NOBLE LORD OF HIGH DEGREE

“**W**AS the Illustrissimo arisen?”

W

“I don’t know.”

“Will the Illustrissimo see anybody this morning?”

“I don’t know.”

“The head butler wishes to know at what hour he shall have ready the Illustrissimo’s breakfast?”

“I don’t know.”

In the long and narrow gallery of a palace, which bore

a name almost as old as that of our ancient Milan, a servant in black livery stalked up and down with the dignified mien of a cabinet minister.

The lower servant bowed, without venturing another syllable; he went through the vestibule which opened in front of the gallery and reëntered the royal ante-chamber, where possibly a dozen other servants were scattered here and there. Some of them were sleepily extended in mid-morning upon benches heraldically carved; others were walking to and fro with their hands under liveried coat-tails; a few chatted ostentatiously among themselves like lawyers in consultation, or let coarse words and noisy laughter escape every now and then from their lips; while still others grouped themselves under the loggia of the court and played at checkers on greasy tables.

The great bell of the Duomo, to which echoed all the others in Milan, announced the stroke of noon, and the Illustrissimo, usurping an hour from sleep—for this was a reception morning—drew aside the blue curtain of his bed, and raising one hand from his pillow, pulled the silken bellrope.

An ugly little man, corpulent, strong-limbed, vulgar of aspect and of bearing, entered immediately into his master's room. He was his chamberlain, and more than a servant, his friend and counselor, the only person in the house who was allowed to penetrate into the intimate apartments of his master. He knew how to retain this privilege; he was, so to speak, the Mephistopheles of the Illustrissimo.

Hardly had he entered when he cautiously opened the window, closed the Venetian blinds and drew down the silken shades so that too bright a light might not offend the eyes of the master. Then he approached the bed, and without saying a word, poured out from a little black flask into a gilded lip-cup some white mixture which he presented to his lord. The latter, raising himself to a

sitting posture, and twisting his mouth and nose, swallowed it, murmuring meanwhile to his attendant:

"When will it be finished, you rascal, this accursed bottle of yours?"

"I have often told you," answered the other in a low voice, and with a grin that made him all the uglier, "that certain things are very costly, for you noblemen as well as for us poor devils."

"Patience!" cried the master, "but beware for yourself if my sciatica is not soon cured!"

The servant laughed again, a strange laugh, but he made no answer. Placing the clothes of his master, which he took from a chest covered with brocade, on an armchair at the foot of the bed, he extended his arms to assist him from his couch, and helped him to sit down, to put on his underclothing, to pull on his stockings. Then investing him with a dark dressing-gown, he ran to open the door, and the *Illustrissimo* dragged himself to the neighboring cabinet.

This cabinet, adorned with mirrors, gilding, sculptured bronzes, candelabra, and a thousand fashionable novelties, contained everything that luxury, convenience, and elegance could desire. On the sideboard, spread with a cover of antique lace, glistened a myriad of vessels, cups and saucers, of crystal, silver and gold, filled with portentous essences and powders. Balsamic vapors issued from them, enough to perfume the kiosk of a sultan of Mysore; in front of the round mirror was a large armchair covered with crimson velvet, and beside this, in a respectful attitude, with folded napkin over his arm, stood the barber of the *Illustrissimo*.

The noble lord threw himself into the chair, and, entrusting his head to the expert hands of the barber, turned to the chamberlain and asked:

"Are they there?"

"Who, *Illustrissimo*?"

"Those that should be there."

And he made a sign with his hand to indicate that the persons waiting without should be allowed to enter.

While they are being ushered in, and the degenerate successor of Figaro is attending to the gray pate of the old patrician, let us cautiously lift a part of the veil that covers this great personage.

However long he may have striven to cancel from his memory the date in the last century when he appeared to bless the genealogical expectations of the family, none the less he bore written on his countenance the cipher of his age. At first sight one would say, "He will never again see seventy-four." Tall in person, slender, with haughty look, and a certain severity of feature, he breathed the real soul of the aristocrat of ancient lineage, a mingling of antique Lombard good nature with Spanish arrogance.

He bore a great name; he had famous ancestors, the one greater and more illustrious than another, for the riches and the splendor of three or four feudal families terminated in him. Although he was lord of entire villages, of woods and commons, he did not even know what his rents amounted to; but he had an administration consisting of a procurator-general, two engineers, three or four secretaries and clerks, all provided with fat salaries; and so the riches of the house, if (as often happens) they did not increase, at least did not diminish. It must be added, however, that the gold in his coffers was not allowed to rust, since the noble apartments, the studs of foreign horses, the sumptuous weekly banquets, the cooks, chamberlains, coachmen, palafreniers, and all the other swarms of liveries upheld the honor of an opulence that was almost proverbial.

Many widows of former servants of that great household lived on the pensions granted to them; every year on a given date small dowries were distributed by orders of the Illustrissimo to poor young girls.

He had also reserved to himself the right to confer cer-

tain ecclesiastical benefices, an ancient patronage of the family with which he attracted a little court of curates, canons and coadjutors, ready to snap up eagerly, for some one of their protégés, the meagerest little benefice that fell vacant. There were not wanting those who knew how to praise to the skies the munificence and the enlightened piety of the great lord who would not allow the customs of his ancestors to lapse, who restored, at whatever expense, some old altar, some fallen oratory in the country, to place in front of it afterward the shield of the family, blazoned with charges of all colors, like a piece of harlequin's dressing-gown, with an inscription, in beautiful Latin of the age of gold, which here, as in the inscriptions on tombs, magnified with sonorous lies the virtues of the wealthy.

Withal, this great personage, so powerful in name and in riches, had no wish to mingle in public affairs. If in the past he had been dragged into them, he made it evident that he wished to know little or nothing about them. With the pride of birth, he had inherited from the noble blood of his ancestors that sort of feudal selfishness which was willing to let the world go its own way so long as it did not compromise the splendor of his house, or the rotundity of his income. It was a pity, in short, that he had been born in our time, instead of in the century of Philip II or Philip IV. While privileges, feoffments, and other prerogatives still endured, he would have gathered around him a princely court. In this later age, in the political convulsions of the country, in that twenty years' war which altered the face of Europe, he lived for long months in one of his own castles, as far as he could from the roar of the cannons; he restricted himself to the circle of private life; he agreed alternately with whatever opinion temporarily triumphed; he paid assessments, tributes, taxes, and was always the faithful friend of the ruling power. Marquises, counts, or barons, whoever had titles or authori-

ty, were welcome in his house, not that he felt a need for them, or sought their friendship; it sufficed him if his name still had an echo in his own class; if the luxury of his apartments, the gold and silver of his banquets dazzled those who moved in his own sphere, as satellites of a planet. Withal he was condescending enough, even though cold and haughty in appearance, a friend of exquisite tables and beautiful women. Still he paid only small attention to his consort, to whom forty years before he had given his name in exchange for her splendid dowry, which was consecrated to restoring the breach made in his revenues by the troubles of 1796.

The noble lady still lived, and in this very palace had apartments separated from those of her husband, for no other reason than princely custom. She too had her own court of counselors and parasites. Husband and wife exchanged the most cordial protestations, each paid the other a daily visit of ceremony, nor had the *Illustrissimo* ever been found wanting, in the ceremonial of dinners and *conversazioni*, in the respect and the honors which their reciprocal dignity exacted. None the less, the lady had permitted herself more than once, in her own evening circle, to suggest with a giggle to certain of her friends that my lord consort had not yet abandoned all the follies of youth, adding seriously that the nobility was from day to day losing greatly in importance and decorum, and that the order and the hierarchy of society was perishing with it. And the fortunate ones who were admitted to this pathetic old trifle at the solemn hour of tea, stifled their laughter in their throats and echoed her sentiments.

Already the hand of the barber, with all the delicacy devoted to his lofty business, had shaved the chin and put in order the bald occiput of the *Illustrissimo*, when the faithful chamberlain reëntered the cabinet, followed by various persons. Well for him that he had not tarried a moment longer, for even as it was he saw the com-

ing tempest in an oblique glance cast upon him by his master; although the iron of the hairdresser held firmly imprisoned the few long gray locks of his head, the irate lord did not leave him in doubt as to his feelings, but buffeted him in the face with "Infamous!"

The chamberlain had already guessed that this was not a good morning for him. So he held his peace, carefully avoiding making any excuses, and left the newcomers to be settled with by the nobleman, each in his turn.

He did not turn his head toward the first one who advanced—a long black figure with lack-luster eyes and hairless skull, with silver-rimmed spectacles on a Roman nose and chin embedded in a white cravat.

"Secretary," said the Illustrissimo. And the other bowed without daring to raise his head.

"You will at once," continued the nobleman, "answer the three letters that came yesterday from Paris, from Rome, and Modena, saying that each correspondent will be paid the expected thousand lire by the usual bankers of the house. You will send the necessary advices and prepare the cheques. I will sign the latter and you will sign the former. Do not forget to ask for information as to how our affairs are progressing, but as usual do not let my name be mentioned. There are many things to be done in my position, but it is not necessary that everybody should know about them. Have you understood? You will then answer the letter of my sister the Countess, and say that I positively cannot accept the charge she offers me, however honorable and pious—note that, honorable and pious. It is true that these charges of hers have no importance for me, but we must say this, because even she is a power, a Richelieu in laced petticoats and satin gown."

"Illustrissimo, it is as if it were already done." And the secretary bowed anew, so low as to touch with his nose the bundle of cards that he held in his hand.

"Let us pass on to the next." And with a snort of

complaisance, as if he were thinking of some speech of the highest importance, he said without turning, "It is your turn, majordomo."

"But, but—if your honor will permit me," ventured the secretary, with his usual inclination, "I would wish to say that to-day was the day fixed by your honor for conferring the two dowries that have been disposable for some time, and also the vacant benefice, concerning which the reverend subdeacon recently spoke to you."

"Don't break my head with business matters; is there perhaps a necessity that you"—

"Not I, not I; but the goodness, the heart of your Lordship, which in a matter of well-doing does not lose an hour"—

"But without any need of your advice, do you understand me?"

These words and the severe tone might in another moment have frozen all answer upon the lips of the humble secretary; but it must be explained that a mighty motive impelled him; he held himself firm, and making another reverence he continued: "If it does not seem to be too presuming on my part, I would request—it seems to me—that a person who enjoys the favor of the illustrious mistress—Father Apollinaris, it seems to me—must have recommended to your lordship a young cleric, of an honest and needy family."

"I understand; you also have your interests to look after, Mr. Secretary. I have, however, often told you that you must not take upon yourself these pledges, if—if you like the air of my house."

"A thousand pardons, Illustrissimo, I have done wrong! But it was because"—

"But—but—but! I want none of your buts, nor of your becauses; I know the true reasons; I know how you are all made—all after some present or some other interest"—

"Oh, I take heaven to witness"—

"Leave heaven in peace," said his noble Lordship.

"Once more, Illustrissimo, a thousand and a thousand pardons. I only wished to say that the poor mother of these young people demands a moment's audience, and her cards are here, in my hand."

"Eh, well, let her wait for the right hour! What people! Stealing the whole day from me! And you, did you have to take so long to explain? Come, give me those papers; let's see what they are about."

He took the papers, but without glancing at them, without even opening them, he laid them on the table, and turning to the secretary, asked: "Do you know anything about these people?"

"They are good people, Illustrissimo, good and poor people. A mother full of years"—

"And of catarrh. I don't want to see her."

"Three children, two of them sons."

"That's very few."

"And a girl."

"Pretty?"

"Oh, really, Illustrissimo, I don't know."

"Come, come now, you do know, I know it very well. Bravo, secretary! you don't wear spectacles for nothing! Now I know what the recommendation is—eh! eh! I said so at once."

The poor secretary was suffering martyrdom. Possibly this was the first time that he had ever thought of doing good to a neighbor, and now he found himself at fault, like a mouse in the claws of an old lion. The family in whose favor he had ventured to speak was that of the widow Teresa; she was even then standing below in a little room in the basement of the house waiting for the opportune time to be presented to the Illustrissimo. The old chemist, her cousin, had interested himself in the matter, for the excellent reason that it would cost him nothing to recommend the embryo priest to the secretary who honored him with his friendship, he

being the apothecary to the house; and the secretary had promised to attend to the matter because of his special regard for the Signor Domenico, who always knew how to accompany his New Year wishes with certain packages of chocolate duly loaded. Consequently Teresa had been able to place in the hands of the secretary himself the papers of her Celso; and she herself, as we have said, was now waiting with beating heart to hear the ministerial "We will see her," through her protector. So matters stood, and that is the reason why the poor man heard himself accused by the lips of his master of thrifty charity.

At these words, accompanied by sonorous laughter from the Illustrissimo, the secretary fell back, and the yellow of his face, from his receding chin to his bald skull, became a fiery red; he inclined his head to conceal it, stammered an excuse which ended in a strange sibilant sound, and slipping behind the corpulent majordomo who was approaching, he gained the door and disappeared.

Thus it cannot be said too often that nearly always the fortune or misfortune of him who depends upon others hangs upon a thread, and is the effect of caprice, or of the good or bad humor of the moment, of a word, a glance, a wink. The assistance hoped for by the poor woman for her son had gone up in smoke.

CHAPTER VIII

CELSO LEAVES HOME

WELL, majordomo, what news have you?" Thus spoke the Illustrissimo while the barber, having given the final touches to the capillary edifice, now let fall over it a shower of dark powder to hide the gray in that famous head-

piece. This was an ancient aristocratic custom, a last tribute to the traditions of his ancestors. He had made his first love conquests with the darkened wig, perhaps by virtue of his wig he hoped to triumph again.

"Illustrissimo," the majordomo answered, "I await orders."

"Breakfast as usual after mass in the audience room. I will then receive a few people until three."

"Very good. And the dinner?"

"As usual. To-day is Saturday. Have you ordered?"

"Yes, Illustrissimo, for the usual Saturday guests, twelve covers."

"It is one of my penitential days; but what can one do? If you don't bring together a dozen of these people, they will raise a hue and cry. For the rest a system is needed; everyone seeks his peers; that is the reason why I think it better to hold Sundays for people of rank, and Thursdays and Saturdays for the others. As for me, I tell the truth, I have no caste prejudices; on the contrary it pleases me to see these good devils making a feast by that grace of God which reaches them twice a week. I know how to put myself on their level without offending my fastidiousness. Come! whom shall we have to-day?"

"Your lordship knows: Doctor Durante, Signor Pino, the architect of the house, Lawyer Natali, the two canons, the coadjutor of the parish"—

"These three I invite out of regard for my wife. And then?"

"Then the lecturer, Capra, the secretary, and the curate of the New Cascine, who came to Milan this morning and was invited on orders of the most illustrious mistress. Indeed, it is through him that she expects to pay reverence to your Lordship."

"Oh, yes, that man! he is a perpetual trustee. I seem to see him now, watching the tour of the plates through the tail of his eye, so that they may not stop at his

left. Oh! a good man! I sympathize with him; he takes away with him the memory of my dishes into the solitude of his kitchen, and talks of them for a month with his maidservant. Ha! ha!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the majordomo, with a respectful echo.

"Come, come! for the silliness of to-day I will compensate myself to-morrow, when at least we shall have guests worthy of the dinner. Have you sent out the invitations?"

"All of them, Illustrissimo."

"I have not had an answer from Count Ippolito and his wife, nor from the Marquis Alfonso. Apropos, I have made an assignation. What will the lovely Countess say at finding herself with her new adorer. Oh, come! in her heart she will thank me, the pretty little woman, and I shall ask the Marquis to give her his arm; she is still a flower among women, the Countess. She somewhat resembles my old flame, Rosalba. You remember her, Rosso?"

These comments, which the Illustrissimo made partly to himself and partly to the faithful servant, were listened to as oracles by the barber and the servants. Next day the story of the amours of the Marquis and the beautiful Countess would be the topic of conversation in the antechambers and in the wine-shops.

"And whom else have we?" continued the nobleman. "Recapitulate, majordomo."

"That Russian prince who arrived on Tuesday; he waited about an hour and then left his visiting-card for your Lordship."

"Good."

"The Cavaliere Lavinio."

"I don't like him much, but he completes the number."

"The Abbate Apollinaris, and that French viscount."

"Exactly! You think of everybody, and do yourself honor."

"Never doubt it. This very morning two cases of Sauterne arrived, also two of Bordeaux, one of Johannisberg, two of champagne, one of"—

"Yes, but don't break my eardrum. You must look after everything, and at the right time give instructions to the administration of the house."

The majordomo buttoned up his coat of the chestnut-colored cloth, readjusted his satin cravat, which was insufficient to keep his double chin in order, rubbed his hands complacently, and, taking two steps backward, disappeared to his own affairs.

Already the Illustrissimo's hair was fully dressed. The barber, who, unlike his predecessors of the previous century, had not dared to enter into the conversation, but at most had accompanied its significant phrases with "ohs," "ahs" and "ehs" and semi-winks of approval, now gathered the implements of his art, laid them in his toilet-case, and departed with a low bow.

Two men were standing at the end of the cabinet in respectful and mute attention. One was the chaplain of the house, a priest of middle stature, sour and inquisitive in aspect, thin and angular in body. His face, pitted with smallpox, seemed an index to the evil passions that gnawed within him. He swayed uncertainly on his thin shanks over which hung his black cassock; in his hand he held his three-cornered hat, and under his arm was a volume of the breviary. Seeing his lips moving, one might have imagined that he was saying his office; but instead he was chewing the cud of his own anger at the thoughtlessness of his lordship, who had made him delay the daily mass until an hour past noon. He twisted his knotty fingers, and scratched the brim of his hat, feeling as if his stomach were in his heels.

It must be believed that the Illustrissimo had at bottom some piety, for he went forward to meet the chaplain, and extended his hand with great condescension. "Don Aquilino," he said, "excuse me if I have made you

wait this little half hour, but go into the sacristy. And you, Rosso, inform my wife. One word, Don Aquilino. Take these papers," and he put them into his hands; "they were brought by some woman who came here about the benefice. After mass, will you take upon yourself the trouble to send her away with some good word? I have so much to do! Tell her that this time I can do nothing; that the benefice is already promised to some one else—to Capperi, you know him, the son of one of my stewards who enters his *sacris* this year. In short, think over the matter yourself; speak about it to my wife, to my sister, and that will be enough. Go on in advance. In five minutes I will join you. To-day you will do me the honor to sit at table with me, Don Aquilino."

The priest, in whom displeasure on the one hand seasawed with fear of the Illustrissimo on the other, knew not what else to respond than a sighing "I will obey." He was about to go, when Rosso accosted him, to whisper in his ear these bitter words, which struck him like a blow from a stiletto: "Dear Don Aquilino, don't be disrespectful. Take care! There is a certain Abbé Pasquale who envies you your post—a fine mouthful, which is well worth a prebendary."

The priest looked daggers at him from an eye of fire, but held his peace, and turning to make his final bow to the Illustrissimo, he withdrew.

In the meanwhile, the Illustrissimo had approached the other person who stood there in an attitude of indifference, leaning against a jamb of the door. From his clothes, from his impassive seriousness, one might have imagined this person to be a notary public, a lawyer, or a physician, but he was something far different. He had the appearance of a stranger to all that was passing, but he had not lost a word that had been spoken, and, pitying master and servants alike, all of whom seemed to him like puppets, he was saying to himself that he could

make them dance on his fingers from the first to the last. He was one of those men, sprung no one knows whence, who may be found everywhere, and full of experience, not because they have sought for any good in the world, but because they make no distinction between good and evil; one of those who know how to make themselves indispensable to great and small; who are successful in everything without appearing to be so; who say little and do much; whose faces are of brass and whose hearts are of granite. Their life is a problem, their trade has no name. Evidently the Illustrissimo held him very dear; in passing he laid a friendly hand on his shoulder and said:

"You also, I expect you there in a little while, when I am breakfasting; I have important things to tell you, Signor Omobono."

Signor Omobono slightly bowed his head, then, tranquilly resuming his hat, he went out of a door opposite to that which the others were taking.

In the mean while, Victor's widow, sitting on a bench in the porter's room of the palace, with how much anxiety only a mother's heart can understand, was waiting, hoping, fearing for two long hours. Enveloped in a black shawl of coarse wool, with a veil over her eyes and her eyes on the ground, the poor woman trembled and felt a chill in her bones, as if it were the middle of winter, while in fact it was the beginning of September. So much had been told her about the generosity of this nobleman that she could not believe it possible he would not extend some help to her. She recalled to mind, and weighed over again the good words she had received from those who had deigned to recommend her; then going back to the sad days of her misfortune, and thinking of her favorite son, she felt as if lost; in secret she recommended herself to the great Advocate of all who weep, and so regained hope. Every now and then the

old porter would ask her some indiscreet question, or magnify with awkward gayety the power and wealth of his master. The people of the household and other employés came and went, but paid no attention to the widow, who, deeming herself forgotten, and still not daring to assert herself, watched for the coming of the secretary who held in his hands the papers that proved her poverty. But seeing him no longer, she felt almost as if she would die.

Another hour passed. The fretful chaplain crossed the yard.

"Where," he cried in a strident voice, "is the woman who brought these papers to the Illustrissimo?"

"It was I," answered the widow, and she moved toward him, hardly daring to breathe.

"Good!" said Don Aquilino, stretching out his neck, without taking another step forward. "We can do nothing this time; we have other things to look after. You must be patient. Your son must wait, as others have to wait."

"Oh, my God!" broke in Teresa.

"Eh! my good woman, there is nothing else to say. You have been badly advised; if you had spoken to me, perhaps the matter would not have turned out in this manner. Bless these people! But I have no time to lose; here are your papers."

And he departed on his way to the old Café del Gnocchi, where hunger summoned him to partake of his accustomed chocolate, and to read the news of the political world in the morning gazettes.

The old woman could just totter back to her seat. She could not say a word. Not till she heard the porter trying in his solemn way to comfort her did she move.

"Don't worry about it," he was saying. "His Lordship will see and provide; in his good time the benefice will come!"

Then she rose and left the palace, where she felt it would be impossible to weep as she wished.

Celso was mortified at the disappointment of his first hope; but Damiano, who only because he did not wish to oppose his mother had allowed her to find her way into a nobleman's antechamber—Damiano, to say truth, was not displeased with the result. Celso had thrown his arms around his mother's neck, saying in a deeply moved voice:

"Patience, mother! God does not yet wish to grant me this grace; but I will study all the more, so that the moment may be hastened when I accomplish my vocation."

Hardly a week, however, had passed when chance, or rather some mysterious power with invisible hand, which finds the clew to so many unknown and obscure things, came to change into lively joy the discomfort of Teresa and her Benjamin.

One evening the family were gathered after dinner, when a knocking was heard at their door, and a voice demanded permission to enter. The visitor was a priest of tall stature, pale face and staid and severe manners; his eyes, his gait, his gestures, and his first words, seemed to announce a mingling of circumspection and kindness; he did not give his own name, but explained that he came on the part of the archpriest of the parish, and for a good purpose. Teresa was all confusion at this honor, and began to thank Providence in her heart. This priest had a foreign accent, and Damiano, however much he studied his motives, his questions and his serious conversation, could not succeed in guessing a motive for his coming. He only noticed that from time to time the priest threw a rapid and furtive glance at him, as if he could divine the doubts that troubled him.

But Teresa was enchanted with him; she listened to his words as if they were gospel truths. She answered everything. She even forestalled his questions; she told the whole story of the family, of their misfortunes, of

the small hopes that remained to them. The priest calmed her, told her to keep up her courage, turned her mind to the consolations of religion, spoke in a voice full of charity and pathetic unction. That day he confined himself to generalities. He promised to return and to take to heart Celso's success, only demanding in exchange that mother and son should take no step without consulting him, nor before he came on a new visit.

It was not long before the priest's return. On the morning of the second visit Damiano was not at home, and the unknown visitor could better insinuate himself into the secrets of the family and the souls of the three good creatures who hung upon his words, now mellifluous, now grave, now gay and now severe. Taking Celso aside, and questioning him at great length, he showed himself not discontented with his mind and character, and told him to come two days later to his own house at the rectory of San to learn what he had decided to do. Then he took leave of the wondering family, accompanied by Teresa's benedictions. He had confided to the young man that he himself was indebted for his own fortunes to a beneficent lady whose name for the present he must not reveal; and in departing, he informed him that when he came to the rectory he must ask for Father Apollinaris.

These happenings stirred up in the family a chaos of suppositions; but no one could reason out the truth. Not even when it was known that Father Apollinaris had invited young Celso to come and stay with him, as he had decided to supervise his theological studies, and to afford him the means of entering into holy orders, could anyone understand why the thing had happened or whence it came. But the family looked upon the proffer as a great piece of good fortune; the mother and the daughter wept with joy, a joy that was embittered only by the thought of a separation from Celso.

Two weeks later, the young cleric, full of hope, left

his home, and in the distant rectory, in a little room allotted to him by Father Apollinaris, he studied indefatigably all through the livelong day, perusing and making notes of the books of the fathers and doctors of the Church, which his protector had chosen for him from his own library. Teresa felt for a time as if she had been deserted, but as the father permitted the young man to pay her rare and brief visits, the good woman was fain to console herself in dwelling with Celso upon their future happiness.

CHAPTER IX

DAMIANO AND THE TEMPTER.

N a cold night in winter, Stella and her mother were hard at work in their chilly and lonely room. Sitting in the corner near the hearth, on which the last pieces of charcoal were dying, Stella was embroidering little pieces of straw and silver leaf into the gossamer tunic of a beautiful ballgown, by the flickering light of a half-consumed tallow candle. Teresa was sewing in the whalebones of a corset made upon a Parisian model. Tunic and corset were to be ready on the morrow to enclose the *svelte* person of a young deity of the fashionable world. They had been working for some time in silence, only occasionally interrupted by a sad word from the mother and a tender and comforting answer from the daughter. The thoughts of both, however, were similar.

Every now and then Teresa, freezing from the cold and damp which penetrated through the door and the windows, would lift the *caldanino* into her lap, and pull up the brazier, to warm her hands over the live coals. Stella herself was impelled two or three times to get down on her knees beside the hearth, for her little pink

fingers were so cold that she could not hold her needle. Then she would return all the more diligently to her embroidery.

One should enter into the houses of the poor to realize how, hidden from the eyes of men, but open to those of God, many mothers with orphaned daughters, many unfortunate artisans with children to look after, find in their work, which scarcely distinguishes day and night, hardly sufficient to tide them over until the morrow, of which they have no time to think.

It was now the end of the carnival. From their lofty room, the widow and her daughter could hear the loud rumbling of the lordly carriages that came and went in every part of the city. This noise of wheels and horses, at first a far-away confusion in the air, became little by little nearer and more distinct. The walls of the houses trembled with it, the little window panes rattled, and then the noise gradually died away in the distance. And thus, like the uproar which disturbed the night, was the mad revelry of the jocund civic season now coming to an end.

Late as the hour was, Damiano had not yet returned home. Having been delayed at the shop in the piazza where he was bookkeeper, he was even now on his way, thoughtful and alone, passing along the Corso of the Duomo and promising himself that he would have a pleasant hour or two with his mother and sister, in reading aloud to them that beloved story of *I Promessi Sposi*, bearing the greatest and best name of our times, which, published a few years previously, still remained popular all over Italy. That name was greatly beloved both by our young hero and the two women, and that book had for a long time formed for their moments of leisure, all their joy, their poetical festival, their carnival.

It was raining slightly. In turning the corner of the Via de' Pattari, Damiano came face to face with a young man, his fellow-student at the lyceum, whom he recog-

nized at once and sought to avoid. The latter would not allow him to do this. Recognizing him by the light of the street lantern, he took him firmly by the arm, and cried:

"Is it you, Damiano? Where are you going?"

"Home," said the lad, dryly. He had no wish to join his acquaintance, whom he knew to be one of the most irresponsible and featherheaded of all his schoolfellows.

"Are you crazy?" replied the other. "Do you go to bed with the chickens? Why, we are in carnival times, by Diana!"

"It is already eleven, and my mother"—

"Oh, bah! ten o'clock hasn't struck yet. I haven't heard the bell of the Piazza de' Mercanti. And besides, what does it matter? Let her go to sleep and come you with me."

"I cannot. It is raining, don't you see?"

"We will go to bed."

"Where?"

"Come with me; don't seek any further. Be content! To-day is Shrove Tuesday, and we too must have a little fun. You need it; I tell you so as a friend. For seven or eight months, ever since your old man left you your liberty, you have been melancholy and misanthropical; you seem to me to have the mien of the young hero lover in the theater. As to me, I never held you for one of our best companions, but there was a time when you were more tractable, when you were one of the brotherhood, as they say. And, for all, I wish you well, and to-night you must come with me and you'll thank me later"—

"I assure you that I"—

"I will not excuse you. Shall I drag you away by force? Are you going to play the pedant? Wait until Lent; then we will return to that cursed lyceum; but there are four days before the end of the carnival, and if I don't celebrate them in four drinks of our best, never

call me Bernardone again. So make no resistance or I'll do you an ugly turn. It is raining, and I am tired of all this talk in the middle of the street in order to convert you. And I swear, by the head of my grandmother, that I wouldn't have done as much for you if you had been a pretty girl."

And holding Damiano firmly by his coat, he sought to pull him back.

In vain did our lad protest; he could not resist the will of Bernardone. Not wishing to excite the anger of his determined companion, or the derision of others, he allowed himself to be led away without a word. With a regretful thought of his mother, of that hour of peaceful domestic joy which he had promised himself, and of his sweet fancies, which had recently become dearer than ever to him, he followed obediently, determined, however, to flee as soon as possible from the clutches of his friend, and cursing with all his heart this unfortunate encounter.

They passed two or three streets, keeping themselves in single file close to the walls of the houses, so as to avoid the rain as much as possible, Damiano in front and Bernardone with a hand on his shoulder, because he did not wish his friend to escape him. Having crossed a little deserted square, the light-hearted student entered one of those narrow, smoky little shops, retreats of indolent twenty-year-olds, where under the name of *Café* liquors and cigars are dispensed and certain turbid lemonades and orangeades—which God preserve us from tasting!—are placed before the unwary.

A cloud of smoke darkened the room, through which could dimly be discerned seven or eight persons seated here and there; the lighted ends of as many cigars; bottles and glasses on little tables; the ruddy glow of a lamp that hung in the middle of the room; the varnished bar with blue and white stripes which passed for veined marble, and behind the bar the round and portly

figure of a woman, enveloped in a shawl a score of years old, with a vicious countenance and two great curls on her forehead. This was the Signora Rosina, owner of the café. The customers were laughing and telling one another amusing or indecent stories, interrupted now and then by a knock on the table or a shrill cry as one or the other of them, tossing off his glass at a breath, sought to celebrate the carnival with a livelier joy.

Bernardone, casting a glance around and not seeing the people he expected to be awaiting him in the midst of the dense smoke, crossed the shop as one well used to the place, and, clutching his friend tightly by the arm, opened a little door at the other end and mounted three stairs to a low-studded, unplastered apartment which looked much more like a cheap barroom than like a billiard-room.

In this place, through this palpable smoke, could be distinguished five or six young men, nearly all collarless and coatless, although the wintry weather outside was very bitter. Some of them held long cigars between their teeth, and others the small clay pipes which form the first delight of beardless smokers. With disheveled hair and untidy clothes, the young companions were seated around the old billiard-table, intent in watching a match between the two champions of the evening.

"Hail to all of us, good friends!" cried Bernardone.

"All hail!" responded the chorus.

And one of them, extending his hand, added: "Here you are at last! we were beginning to be afraid that by this time the wine had nailed you above or below the benches of the tavern."

"Oh, confound it, I'm not a novice like you, Barelo. Besides, haven't we the whole night to ourselves?"

"It happens we didn't know," complained in falsetto tones another youth, as he planted himself in front of Bernardone; "we didn't know where the feast is that you intend to take us to, otherwise we should have gone

there quick enough, and I'd have been the first, perhaps, to rob you of your sweetheart."

"Listen to what he says, the featherless duckling! I'll shove your words back into your mouth with this caress!" and Bernardone lifted his right hand, as if he intended to smite the daring braggart.

"Come, come!" another leaped up to say, "respect for Bernardone, who is our chief, the flower of friends! Come, let us lose no time."

And three or four of them, seeking their own coats and hats amid the disorderly heaps of clothes, cried out together: "To the feast! to the feast!"

"What the devil's the matter? Wait a bit!" cried the two billiard-players, "in a minute we shall have finished." And waving their cues above their heads, they threatened to break them upon the skulls of the first who attempted to leave the room.

"Very well, Tito, we'll watch the last shots!"

"Fifteen for the white, twenty for the black."

"Mark is shooting out of turn."

"Oh, shut up! Don't ever interrupt me when I am shooting."

"Bravo! Good shot!"

"Hello, damn it! that's nineteen."

"Good for little Mark, I once saw him make a run of thirty-five."

"Ah, now it's Tito's shot."

"Give it to him, Tito!"

"Three points, that makes twenty-three."

"So it's my turn, said Mark; "Well, if I lose it, I hope I'll lose my nose."

"He's a devil, little Mark."

"Nineteen and six; the game is mine!"

Mark shouted with joy: both threw their cues upon the table, and dressing themselves hastily, rushed out of the room to run to the feast where Bernardone, their leader, was to present them as his friends.

Nobody gave a thought to Damiano; some of them knew him, the others would not have dreamed of asking who he was, for he came under the escort of Bernardone. But he would have given the little money he had in his pocket, if he could have got away from the ill-bred crowd, and found himself with his mother and his sister.

The house whither they were going was not far off. Situated in a blind alley, it faced gloomy habitations standing back to back to each other, into which a ray of sunlight or moonlight never entered.

This muddy byway was dimly illumined by two lamps placed above two doors. One bore, written in capital letters of various colors: *A magnificent Easter manger with figures*; the other, which was the entrance to the very house for which they were bound, exhibited on one side a black hand painted with the index finger extended, and in front of it this thoroughly Milanese sign: *Ancient manufactory of Pastry*.

Passing through a dark entrance, the revelers took a steep staircase, slippery with mud, which they ascended, and then halted upon the second-story landing, where a tremulous light shone through a pane of glass with an onion leaf blown into it. A half-open door, and the noise from within, sufficiently indicated that the feast was here.

Already the noise of climbing, the shouts and the interjected oaths of those who had stumbled on the steps, had announced them. A few came forward to meet them on the landing or in the room which for the nonce served as an antechamber and a place of deposit for coats and umbrellas, and for the eatables and the drinkables of the feast. In a corner stood a little table, behind which an old woman was squeezing the juice of a dozen lemons in a big bucket of water, to pour it out into seven cups arranged on a tray of corrugated tin. On the windowsill were dozens of small plates and a goodly number of bottles of various sizes, above which towered two of

those straw-covered full-bellied vessels known as demi-johns; beside them were breads and cakes of all sizes and shapes. In another corner, on a stove, sundry fowl were cooking over a slow fire in two casseroles, the perfume whereof was already titillating to the appetite. At the end, behind an immense screen, one could divine the presence of a bed ensconced there for this evening of general upsetting.

The old woman, who was in fact the mistress of the house, the most famous huckster in the neighborhood, went from table to stove and thence into the other room, keeping an eye on everything, listening to this one and that one, arranging plates and baskets and knives and forks and pewter spoons, shouting, laughing, or cursing wherever necessary in order to make herself heard.

In the next room—it was the dancing-hall—were gathered from fifteen to twenty young girls, all pleasing, some pretty, with that prettiness which reveals itself in frank countenances, in freshness of complexion, in sincerity of smiles, real rose-blossoms of a springtime bouquet. Nearly all were dressed in the same way, so that one might have taken them for sisters—a short gown of percale, either white or rose-colored (their best summer gown) a girdle of green or red ribbon around their waists, a collar embroidered by their own hands, gloves of soft white cotton, hair flowing down their backs and parted on the forehead, their youthful and graceful appearance making up for anything that was lacking. Best of all, their eloquent eyes sparkled with a joy that was all the more true and lively because so rarely experienced. Here were the very flower of the milliners, the seamstresses and the tailor-girls of the neighborhood, come with their mothers, their aunts, and their grandmothers to the Shrove-Tuesday festival celebrated in the house of Signora Emerenziana, the old huckster.

Signora Emerenziana, or rather, Mother Pelagia (to call her by the significant name whereby she was known

to all the students in the neighborhood), was one of those women who, through pure malice, are willing to stand at the right hand of the devil and lure into evil ways anyone that comes along. Having a large clientèle in the quarter, and knowing through her business the affairs of half the city, besides doing something in the way of huckstering, she had little difficulty in preparing this festival, to which she invited her friends to bury the carnival in merriment.

Two students, lovers of mirth and of pretty girls, had come as deputies from all the committees to Mother Pelagia, and put into her hands a hundred lire collected from their circle, leaving her *carte blanche* to order everything for the feast. She had taken charge of the matter, and for the appointed evening had promised a dance-hall, fair dancers, musicians, refreshments, supper and everything. For three days she had not been a minute idle. She had summoned to her aid all her neighbors on the same floor to move furniture and other things, clear up the two rooms of her apartment, scour the old stone floor and remove from the wainscots of the hall the spiders which for a year past had spun curtains and veils there.

The chairs that were needed for the hall she took incontinently as a loan from her friends, two or three from one, five or six from another, caring little whether they were clean or dirty, sound or lame; the other furnishings she provided by rummaging among the masses of confiscated goods which for months and years had accumulated in the storeroom below.

That very morning, wishing, as she said, to do the thing with honor, she had run to the corner of the Via di San Martino, and, calling into the house one of the whitewashers waiting there in expectancy, had made him give a coat of white, or rather of pearl-color, to the walls of the hall. To the tops of the windows she nailed streamers of old Damascus tapestry, falling in a rich and

bizarre fashion, one with green tassels, and the other with red and yellow stripes. Two ancestral portraits of the last century—God knows whom they represented!—and two other dark and dingy paintings, which usually hung outside of her shop—on one of which could be dimly discerned the points of the crown, and the yellow beard of a King David, on the other the naked shoulders of a penitent Magdalen—both in frames that were still half gilded, adorned the walls of the hall. All around, a little beneath the ceiling, hung in festoons a long dusty garland of flowers and odds and ends of paper, so that, as the old woman described it, that room looked like an enchanted garden in springtime. This garden was illumined by a tin lamp with three branches which was suspended by a hook from the largest beam in the roof and dispensed a rosy and fitful glow, filling the air with the odor of scorched oil. Finally, in one of the corners an ancient spinet balanced itself on unsteady legs. Here were laid the instruments of the other musicians; a clarinet, a guitar and a hunting-horn. And for all the various furnishings of the festival and the supper, and all the good cheer of the evening, the expenses were to be taken out of the one hundred lire provided by the gay students, and not only that, but Madame expected that some balance of profit would be left in her hands.

CHAPTER X

THE SHROVE-TUESDAY BALL

THE festival, interrupted for a moment by the boisterous entrance of the students, was at its height. The young musicians, returning to their posts with renewed vigor, intoned a bacchanal. No other name could be given to this music, for while one pounded furiously on a strident spinet,

another blared on a clarinet, a third thrummed on a broken-stringed guitar, and the fourth and last attempted to keep in accord with this confusion of sounds by monotonous blasts upon his hunting-horn. It was, in fact, a novel, an infernal music. But the musicians, who were not paid, took care not to miss their rights as guests, and so at intervals one or the other of them laid down his instrument and ran to take part in the revelry of the dances, frequently stealing a partner from this or that student.

The mothers, the aunts, the grandmothers surrounded the room with a sort of garland of strange faces, red but smiling. Their heads were adorned with light-colored headdresses; they were enveloped in gray, red or brown shawls, and, confident in the virtue of their girls, they closed an eye when their charges passed before them in the whirl of the waltz or the galop; or they quietly entertained one another, laughing, shaking hands, gossiping about their husbands, their masters, or their neighbors, and very often gazed into the next room to see whether suppertime were at hand.

The young people danced incessantly. Each had chosen a favorite, and, so long as the breath of the musicians lasted, so also did the breath of the girls. At the beginning of every dance, each turned to her companion in the preceding one. He rarely yielded her to another. If he did so through generosity, he did not join in that dance at all, but kept a jealous eye upon the couple while it passed in front of him. Everybody, youths and maidens, without exception, was apparently animated by the same delight.

In the midst of this gay assemblage some of the older men stood chatting together in groups, or took a mischievous delight in seeing the white-robed girls leaping and whirling around, of which these gay performers were sometimes angrily conscious. And there were others who chuckled as they raised their chins from out their

ample cravats, and, forgetting their forty years and their gray hairs, launched ogles and compliments on the buxom lasses, who speedily whirled out of their sight without paying attention to this homage. These were eminently respectable neighbors, shopkeepers, and merchants, acquaintances or particular friends of Mother Pelagia.

One of these, who assumed certain airs of importance, although he occasionally allowed himself to get in the way of a young couple, and even stretch out a hand as if he were seeking to wrest the girl away for himself, seemed to enjoy some sort of superiority over the others; he talked more and laughed more than any of them. He was the man whom we have once before met in the *Illustrissimo's* cabinet, the mysterious man of whom we as yet know no more than that he was called Signor Omobono. At present, however, he was very different from what he had formerly appeared; he was now dressed in a fine black coat faced with velvet, with rich lace embroidery on the bosom of his shirt, in which shone a splendid diamond. But with all there was a suspicious and sinister suggestion about him; his malign glance resembled that of a wolf or rather of a spy. But though he appeared among these good and unsuspecting people, gathered for a little frolic and nonsense, it was not easy to guess for what purpose he had come thither.

Damiano stood utterly lost in the midst of this joyous company. On their entrance Bernardone had presented him to a friend or a schoolfellow; others knew him and accosted him graciously, as one who had arrived under the ægis of the leader. Among them was a lad who clapped him on the shoulder and cried: "I know that you also have a pretty little sister; why didn't you bring her with you? Look you, Gigia, that little rascal, wouldn't come, and I have to stand here in a corner like a mushroom. Come, Damiano, go and get your sister; she is a pretty flower who is lacking to the bouquet."

At these words, Damiano blushed, and drew aside with

a stammered excuse. But Signor Omobono, with the alert eye and the attentive ear, caught in mid-air the words of the student.

In whatever manner, after what he had overheard in the Illustrissimo's cabinet, he had succeeded in learning something about the girl, he did not choose to let this opportunity slip by him. By flattering remarks distributed right and left, he succeeded in gratifying the vanity of the old women seated in the circle, and had soon gathered from them the names of the young man and his family, and how the widow and her daughter were able to support their poor existence—in short, all that he pretended he did not care to know but which he valued very highly.

Meanwhile, girls and boys continued their festive whirl with an energy and violence that made the foundations of the house dance with them.

More than once Damiano endeavored very quietly to reach the door so as to escape unseen, but always one or another of his companions, and most frequently Signor Omobono, who seemed to have made him an object of special attention, would stop him on his way. And no matter how often he told them that he never cared to dance, still he was detained by these friends.

But now the heat of the ball, the dust that had been raised by the fury of forty feet, had reduced to extremity the stomachs and the throats of the dancers. Cries arose from all sides: "Mother Pelagia, is it time yet?"—"Signora Emerenziana, it is midnight!" "Oh, how hungry I am!" "Mother Pelagia! For pity's sake!" "To the attack! On to the saucepans!" "Hurrah for us! give us food!"

And the whirling couples halted, youths and maidens grouped themselves in the middle of the hall, drew together, attracted by the perfume of the long delayed food. Some of them precipitated themselves into the little ante-room, where the ruthless mistress of the house, a corner

of her white apron gathered up in one hand, her right arm wielding a huge ladle, and looking like a witch disturbed in her incantations, threatened to brain anybody who dared to approach her ovens, which from their crackling embers threw out living sparks.

At that very moment, crashing through the door, two unexpected additions to the company came leaping and dancing into the room. With them the laughter, the gayety and the tumult redoubled. Who were they? No one knew except Bernardone, in whose ear the new arrivals whispered a word or two in passing. He answered with a resounding *Viva*, which echoed to the roof of the house. These two, masquerading, the one as Puff, the other as Harlequin, began to dance and turn somersaults in so mad a fashion, to shout their delight in so loud a tone, that all the guests formed a circle around them, and then began a war of mouthings, gesticulations, and other follies. Nothing less than the strident voice of the mistress of the house announcing the supper hour could have brought calm into this Babylonian carnival.

In a twinkling, youths and maidens rushed here and there to take their seats, and in every part of the room groups were formed as if by enchantment. Beside every girl sat her loyal partner, with knee pressed against knee in such fashion as to make a sort of table for the reception of the expected banquet. The few who remained without companions walked to and fro enviously eyeing the more fortunate ones. Amid the squeaking of the chairs, the hum and buzz of conversation, each couple received a little plate, a glass and a knife and fork. Then began fresh explosions of laughter and joyous exclamations.

And now the mistress entered, with two worthy women behind her. She bore a capacious tureen of steaming *visotto*, which is one of the delights of every carnival feast; the others carried two huge dishes heaped with *salame* and *salsicce*, and a great roasted turkey.

This apparition was like a signal for assault. A great cry of *Viva* was heard, and fifty hands hurried to the charge. In a moment tureen and plates were as bare as a desert. To the cries and the babbling and the music succeeded a tempest of sound from the scraping of spoons and forks. Compliments, retorts, and all affectations were forgotten; every man looked out for himself and for his companion, and a good glass of malmsey cleared the dust out of the throats of the young couples. Neither the old people nor the musicians had come to remain looking on at the dancing all night. There they now stood, knife and fork in hand, until the choicest tidbits, the first flasks of wine were theirs, and the lads and lassies, to keep them in good humor, let them have their way.

Thus the joyful hours fled past. But Damiano, finding himself, against his will, surrounded by so many madcaps at a time, when he wished to be free and alone in his own room, and being also the target for the eyes of some malicious bystanders who seemed to look upon him as an object of ridicule, felt his ill-humor increasing. In secret he cursed this feast, which perhaps at any other time might have seemed to him delightful. He execrated the carnival, his friends, and himself.

His discomfort reached its climax when, turning his head, he found at his side the importunate personage who from the first seemed to be shadowing him—Signor Ombono. The latter, who was gnawing at a chicken's leg, paused and whispered into his ear:

"And you, dear boy, don't you dance? don't you eat?"

"No," Damiano replied.

"Come, now, don't play the fool, or I'll tell everybody that you are in love."

Damiano held his peace.

"I know you; are you aware of that? I know you, your mother, and your sister. She is a sweet little rosebud, and I can do her good, I can indeed. I don't say

this boastingly, but I am on a friendly footing with the first gentlemen in Milan. You seem to me a good lad. I know that you have had your troubles; but confide in me and never fear. When I set myself to"—

"Signor"—began the youth, half in anger, half in pride, for he felt a repugnance to the stranger and to the words spoken in this tone of affected compassion.

"Don't worry, let come what may, I tell you! I shall come to pay you a visit. I know where you live, and we will talk at our ease. I am interested in your family. Come, be good, my boy! Let's drink this glass between us, as a pledge of friendship, and trust in me!"

"Neither I nor mine have need of anything, Signor," Damiano answered, with ill-concealed displeasure. He tore himself away from the group that surrounded him. Signor Omobono wished to grasp his arm, but with a thrust here and there into the crowd he was able to clear a way for himself and reach the door.

Then an unforeseen accident came to his assistance. The triple flame of the garlanded chandelier smoked, wavered and sputtered at the point of extinction. Seeing this, a tall, thin youth advanced to the head of the company, crying, "Let me attend to it, let me attend to it!" Thrusting aside girls and boys, he stretched his hand to the tall lamp, and, with the best of intentions, awkwardly overturned it. The garland of paper flowers caught fire at once; a great flame leaped up, and died out again, and all was dark. A single forgotten wax taper burning in a corner was the only light left. The laughter, the shouts, the panic, the confusion that followed an accident that harmed nobody gave Damiano an opportunity to slip out unseen. Having found the stairs, he fled precipitately, and, paying no heed to the rain, he made his joyful way homeward.

His mother and Stella were awaiting him with troubled hearts. They were still at their work. Every now and then the elder woman lamented the unusual tardiness of

her son; the other, though her own heart misgave her, sought calming words to reassure the mother. She kissed her affectionately, and dissipated her fears by assuring her that Damiano must have been detained against his will by his schoolfellows and had had no opportunity to tell them why or where. So, consoling and consoled, they tranquilly retired to their beds, while Damiano, who had returned to his own room, lighted the lamp on his desk, and, without making any noise, for he wished them to think he was asleep, opened the beloved volumes that had so often filled the bare room with sweet aerial visions and made him forget the tedious cares of the day. He turned over and over again the pages of the notebook in which he had jotted down the finest things he had read, and the joyous or melancholy records of his fancy—simple or poetic pages which no heart could understand save the heart that had conceived them. Then he drew out a collection of crayon drawings, sketches and figures that he never had dared to show to anyone, and hastily ran his eye over them as if he were seeking in these confused fragments a new and better inspiration.

In the solitude of poverty, in the deep silence of the night, his soul, which had been saddened and shocked at the sight of coarse and vulgar joys in which he could no longer share, now once more raised itself into the poetic spaces of the infinite. Rejoiced to find himself alone, he no longer blushed at the emotions that agitated his heart, which he knew not how to express to others. He felt that he had something unusual in his soul, and, raising his face toward the blackened ceiling, he seemed to be interrogating with ardent eyes an unknown spirit, the angel who received his prayers and his sighs, who unveiled to him the divine forms of beauty, and promised to reveal to him, little by little, the mystery of art.

Until now, Damiano had not dared to confide to any living soul the hopes that had given him courage and life, reconciling him to the necessity of suffering. It

seemed to him that a loud voice called out to him, saying: "You too can be an artist!" But this mysterious love was to be made known to no one, not even to his old friend the painter Costanza, who, without knowing it, had kindled the first flame in his heart. The good man had hoped to teach the poor boy an honest trade, but Damiano felt that he had been born for something else. He loved art, beauty, and truth as they revealed themselves to him in the city's few monuments of antiquity, in the majesty of our old churches, in the sacred paintings of solitary chapels. He had interrogated the great works of the past and had determined to become a painter. But no one had cast eyes upon the first essays of his hand; if he had shown these pages scribbled over with strange designs, he would have thought he was profaning the art he loved so well. So he kept them to himself. Nobody knew of them, nor recognized the vital thought revealed in these bizarre creations of youthful fantasy. Nevertheless, a feeling for beauty, a confidence in his eventual success, and a secret tormenting idea spoke to the modest soul of Damiano, so that he had resolved that he would win recognition, and would tempt fortune to that end. In these leaves full of figures he had sought for many months to give expression to a lofty thought already matured in his mind, which was to form the subject of his first picture.

But that night, after an hour of enthusiasm, the saddest thoughts of his life filled his heart. He recalled the many sorrows of the past. He rested his head upon his hand; his brow was burning; he felt his pulses throb, a mist came before his eyes, and in the scattered drawings on his table, he could no longer distinguish lines or curves or figures. He would have wept, but could not; his brain, a tireless tormentor, seemed to find pleasure in the agony of his heart. But there are thoughts we cannot conceive twice; there is a pain that is necessary—the pain that inspires and creates.

"O God!" Damiano prayed that night, "Thou who hast placed these hopes in my heart, make me nourish them in patience and humility, but take away from me this martyrdom of feeling which does not translate itself into action; grant that I may not listen to that voice within me which is ever crying 'Poor lunatic, to think you are something when you are really nothing!' "

His thoughts took on a darker shade. He pitied himself as a simpleton running after a shadow; then, trembling under the oppression of his own thoughts, he felt a chill in his heart, and a dread that this fixed idea might some day make him lose the light of reason. And that voice spoke in a severer and harsher tone: "What have you done that you should succeed at anything great, when there are so many who merely are born, who live, and die? Two years of dreaming and time wasted in putting vain lines upon paper, in mixing colors upon an unaccustomed palette, in daubing the discarded canvases of your poor master—such are the preparations you have made for your future!"

Then, agitated with an almost mortal uneasiness, he continued his train of thought: "Shall I, then, make a sacrifice of myself to a vain shadow? I will die with my secret. I will take with me into the grave this fever of the soul, and in the mean time my mother and my sister will have the right to say, 'You were the only one who could save us from poverty, and you have done nothing for us?' Ah, no, no! I see that I ought to strangle these illusions in my heart, at no matter what cost. What does it matter? If I cannot be a painter, I will be a shop-boy, a clerk, a scrivener, something that will make me like other people. There are so many who love and feel and suffer in the world, and they, too, are my brothers. I will work for gain, in the daytime; I shall have the reward of sustaining the life of these sainted creatures who are a legacy from my father, the only real friends I ever shall know on earth. The indifference of

my companions, their pity, worse even than their contempt, the necessity that faces me, to-day and to-morrow, the greatness of the destiny that I have imagined, that melancholy which has put forth roots in my heart, do not all these warn me that I have mistaken my way? Ah, if I were alone! Then I could abandon myself to the forces that bear me along, like the current of a river; I could tempt success, or die! Nobody would weep for me. But as it is—No, no! let me have a little love, some one to smile on me, to speak a word to me from the heart, and I will without complaint live the unknown and monotonous life of the poor man who goes and comes between the home and the shop. They will bless me, and Thou, O Lord, wilt give me the strength that I need to make me a good son and a good brother!"

Softly he crept over to the window, opened it, and looked out into the dark. It was still raining. He took no notice of the cold, which penetrated to his bones, as he turned over in his mind the beautiful imaginings which now seemed to be taking flight forever. Then his thoughts turned to those who, having begun as he had, with the will, with energy, with the obstinacy of courage, had in spite of everything climbed to the summit of the mysterious temple, and he tried to persuade himself that, once the first painful struggle had been won, he too might yet find the way. He pictured to himself the holy joy of his mother, of his sister, a more tranquil life for them, a modest fortune, a peaceful home. But he counted the years that must elapse, and realized that in the mean time it was necessary to provide for the morrow.

"It is impossible; we must bow the head, it is impossible! Let us think of it no more, and may no one know of this martyrdom!"

He sat down again by the bed; his thoughts rushed in confusion through his brain. He could no longer meditate, he could but feel and suffer almost without consciousness of self.

At last he could bear up no longer; a convulsive spasm ran through all his limbs, and, letting his head fall upon the table, he was soon lost in deep and heavy sleep.

At an early hour in the morning, a light hand was placed upon his shoulder. It was the hand of Stella. She, seeing that the bed was undisturbed, the lamp still lighted, and the table strewn with papers, thought that her brother had sat up all night at his studies, and wished to rouse him from this uncomfortable posture, so that he might have at least a short hour of sleep.

But the lad awoke, rose, and as he glanced around seemed to have lost memory and consciousness. He was very pale; dark circles showed around his eyes; he made no answer to the loving words of his sister, but looked at her long and steadily, kissed her on the brow, and then shook his head. A moment later he put on his hat and, explaining that he must get a breath of the fresh morning air, he left the room.

CHAPTER XI

THE SPIDER SPINS A WEB

THE wicked man labors ever and lives in fear, a philosopher has said, either planning evil for the injury of others or reaping its fruits, and ever suspicious that what he plots against others they may plot against himself. And there are those who love evil for evil's sake. While they seek to hide their tracks in the darkness they do not perceive the end to which their sordid war against the righteous will conduct them. Therefore envy and malice give birth to crime.

Let us for a moment withdraw from the widow's house. Penetrating into that of the Signor Omobono, with whom we have had two fleeting encounters, we may

haply learn how he bore the frigid response of Damiano to the offer of his protection made on the night of the ball.

A woman enveloped in a French shawl, of a color which it would have baffled any one to define, mounted the stairs of the remote dwelling of this mysterious man.

"Who is it?"

"A friend!"

"Yes? who?"

"It is I, Emerenziana; open, please."

"I understand. I am coming."

And Signor Omobono cautiously opened the door half way. Seeing that it was indeed the huckster woman, he drew back in order to let her pass, and closed the door again. From the dark antechamber they passed into a small parlor hung with paper of a light greenish hue which was peeling off the damp walls; there was a little table, two chairs of well-worn leather, and an iron chest built into the wall, defended by an iron screen perforated here and there with loopholes like a casement.

Enveloped in a lined cassock, the collar of which was bordered with the skin of a gray cat, Signor Omobono approached the hearth. Bestriding a chair in front of the fire, he stretched his heels out upon two bricks, placed there in lieu of andirons. He leered at the old woman with a sneer that she understood.

"Well?" he said.

Mother Pelagia, who had sat down upon a little sofa beside the chimney, answered first with a wink of evil import, and then continued in a low voice:

"We must see; the thing is not so easy as it seems at first sight. It may be all right, a mere matter of gold, as they say; and it is known that you are a good bloodhound, my friend. I intend to do my best, because I fully understand, from what you have told me, that afterward you intend to find her a husband."

"Certainly, all in good time," grumbled Omobono.

"That being the case, I close an eye on the rest. Everybody knows that I am an honest woman. And if there were not a good end in view"—

"Oh, come! You have already told me of your scruples a hundred times. To the point! Do you know the things I wish to know? Have you succeeded in establishing a little friendship with the girl?"

"Softly, Signor Omobono, I know, and I don't know. There is good feeling, but there is something in the way. After all, they are exceedingly honest folk, and the girl knows nothing of the world."

"So much the better," the other muttered.

"The mother is a poor bigot, who lives only for her Benjamin, whom she has sent out of the house to become a priest. The girl, to tell the truth, is a beauty, and as to her brother, the young fellow you saw in my house, you can judge better than I."

"Yes, yes, he is the only one that stands in my way, and he may do me a bad turn."

"Still, they tell me he is a good boy."

"He is a madman who doesn't know his own interest; a fellow who has only enough to live on until to-morrow, yet tries to put on airs with me. Oh, he will change his tone, I tell you truly; my young gentleman will change."

"But let us understand each other. I don't see how—if your intentions are good, as you tell me"—

"I think I have sufficiently explained myself to you. I don't enter into this thing for nothing. I can't tell you any more than I have already told you. I love to do good where I can, provided a little good comes to me also. Now imagine that some great personage, one of those who have a full purse and nothing to do, has heard this family spoken of; imagine that he wishes to assist the widow, without making himself known in the matter; imagine that he has obligations, old ones, remote ones—they may be many and of many sorts; imagine that this person has said to me: 'Omobono, you who are a prudent

man, a man of the world, see whether you can find out, if you can learn certain matters—where and how and why—and if necessary you may even in anticipation disburse a hundred or so of lire.’”

At these words Mother Pelagia pricked up her ears and showed that she had understood, although the crafty Omobono had enveloped his design in a guise which she was not expected to examine too closely.

“Let me think the matter out,” she said, rising. “I understand, and I will do all I can. I have explained my scruples to you, so that you might assure me that no evil was intended, and that it was simply a question of the obligations this gentleman owes toward the family of whom we were speaking. But, in any event, can you guarantee that I shall have my shoulder to the wall?”

“Go on, go on; not a fly shall stir! But don’t be too hasty; take things as they come, quietly. Let no one know or guess anything, and above all don’t let my name be mentioned. Don’t even confess that you know me.”

“Have no fear; we understand each other. When there is anything new, I’ll let you know.”

“No, don’t trouble yourself; I will come to you—that will be better. I am seldom at home. I have a perfect deluge of matters to attend to, and you would run the chance of not seeing me. I will call on you.”

“As you will. In the mean time may you enjoy good health!”

“Farewell for the present, Signora Emerenziana.”

He accompanied her to the door, opened it and shut it behind her with great caution. When he found himself alone, he broke out into a loud, scornful laugh, and, rubbing his hands, began to walk up and down the room, while words escaped as if involuntarily from his lips.

“Go on, you old witch! Omobono understands his own business and you swallow as greedily as all the others. This girl, this flower, whose equal I have not seen for a long time, who looks like a little Madonna, is wanted by

—is the one that must make my fortune in one way or another. I haven't lost my judgment; no, I don't risk a hair, and in the end, if we do not win the game, the Illustrissimo will none the less have the graciousness to pay me this time also. Am I the man to play hunting-dog for him if I had not my own excellent reasons? At present all my affairs are turning out well; if the devil doesn't put his tail into them, why, before two years have passed away, Omobono, the bankrupt shopkeeper, will see certain people take off their hats to him who now keep him waiting in antechambers, and look upon him as a victim to be plucked. Poor souls!"

Passing behind the screen, he opened the lock of the iron safe by means of a secret combination, took out a few bundles of old papers, cast up accounts, took note of signatures with seals and without, calculated sums in multiplication and addition, looked over books of records and receipts, plunged all the while in Midas-like dreams.

Meanwhile, Teresa's family, serene and blessed in the midst of their misfortunes, lived a humble and exemplary life, in which happiness was not lacking.

Damiano alone had for some time been growing melancholy. His mother and sister always saw him plunged in thought; he ate little at dinner, he spoke less; he remained away from home almost the entire day. They did not know that he passed all the free hours of the morning in the studio of the old painter, to whom, after a period of doubt and mental struggle, he had confided his wish to find out in every possible way whether his vocation for art were a true one, so that he might once for all decide for success or failure. He did not cease frequenting the schools of the lyceum, for as he had sworn that he would learn as soon as possible how to provide for the wants of the family, he did not wish to close upon himself this his only door to an honest trade. In the meanwhile the little that he gained from the shop put him out of imminent necessity, and gave him courage.

For a long time the worthy family had not seen Signor Lorenzo, their only friend and protector. At first the old soldier had not felt the full weight of Victor's loss, and the cares he devoted to the orphans of his comrade-in-arms, and the remains of soldierly pride in his heart had soothed the wound for some months. But the habit of a whole life could not be surrendered in a moment. To see disappearing around him one by one the last survivors of the glory of the Emperor, those with whom he had a thousand times defied and conquered death, his companions in war, his friends whom he was wont to call men of a lost mold, to find himself alone and unknown, the last of the heroes who bore written upon their wrinkled brows and in the wounds on their breasts the great events of their time—all this inspired a melancholy disdain in Lorenzo's mind, and so worked upon him that he held himself apart from those who alone could call up a smile to disperse his gloom, and unbend his gray eyebrows from their habitual frown.

He no longer made his accustomed trips out of the Ticinese gate, which he still called Porta Marengo, or along the Strada di Mosca, or beyond the Sempione Arch. At the most he went from his own house, which was in the Via di San Simone, to a little deserted café not far off, kept by the widow of another of his old comrades who had perished in the gorges of the Beresina. And there, stretched in a corner, or standing and gazing out of the glass in the front door, he would stay hour after hour, and sometimes the entire day. Thus his visits to Teresa became much rarer, but not because he had lost the good will he bore toward that worthy soul. Old habits were so strong in him that they often conquered the only affection that retained a lively hold on his heart; and when the family no longer lived in the little house in the Via Quadronno which he had visited every day for seventeen years, he hardly knew how to find the way to their new dwelling. But his heart was not changed.

Living economically on his meager pension as a *cavaliere* (and since the day of Victor's death the ribbon of his decoration had never been seen in the buttonhole of his carefully brushed coat), the honest old fellow had found means, as he saved something every month, to lay aside a few hundred lire, which he intended for the dowry of his friend's daughter when the right time arrived. This was a secret.

Nevertheless, for several weeks he had not left the house. Sitting beside the window after he had drunk a bowl of hot water in the morning, he re-read for the twentieth time the *History of Charles XII*, laughing silently and scratching his head at the descriptions of eighteenth-century battles; then when a neighbor came in bringing him something for dinner he would entertain him with accounts of the Great Man's campaigns, in which he himself had had a share and which now he had rare opportunities to describe. But often he would suddenly interrupt himself, and an ardent phrase or a war-cry of the olden time would finish in a loud imprecation, in a soldier's oath which would put the honest neighbor to flight.

After some time passed in this solitary, monotonous, and seemingly insane fashion, the veteran began to feel uneasy and finally indisposed. Damiano, having heard nothing of him for a long time, came by chance to visit him, and, finding him ill, he hastened to tell Teresa, who, reconciling herself at once with her crabbed friend, let not a day pass without coming with her daughter to help and comfort him. Damiano himself would accompany them thither in the morning and return to take them home before the dinner hour. These renewed relations of care and affection soon restored Lorenzo to his wonted health, and were for him and for the little family a great consolation.

In order to raise no question on which they might differ, the old Jacobin refrained from any mention of the

name of Celso, or of what had been; he saw that he never should be able to make Teresa understand the reasons he held to be sound and good. Had he known that the fate of the young novice was in the hands of those who purposed to make of him exactly what his good sense had anticipated, he certainly would not have hesitated to speak, even at the cost of breaking altogether with the widow of his old friend.

Thus Teresa, in expectation of better times, spent the busy and monotonous days of her new poverty. At the end of Lent, Signora Emerenziana, under pretext of bringing her some clothes to mend from a fashionable milliner, spent two hours with the widow, and knew how to draw out from the unsuspecting woman the litany of her sorrows, which the huckster accompanied with responses such as "Oh, me!" and "Ah, me!" and "Lord God!" A few days later she returned in company with a gentleman, somewhat advanced in years, who was unknown to Teresa but who had the air of a person of importance. She presented him as a wealthy man in private life, a retired merchant, who had considerable work to give out, nothing less than an order for several dozen of handkerchiefs, neckerchiefs, collars, and similar delicate goods for the wedding trousseau of a young lady of illustrious family.

Teresa, full of good faith, thought she had fallen upon a great piece of luck, and could hardly finish thanking the gentleman, who on his side gazed furtively around him with his little ferret's eyes, and seemed to be studying in the humble but decent poverty of the rooms the secrets of their domestic and obscure life. Letting his fingers play with the big golden chain and the pendent seals that adorned his paunch, he seemed to be weighing what might be the price of the honesty of these unprotected people.

Before leaving he had assumed with them an air of such confidence and friendly protection that the good

woman recommended herself to him with ardent prayers, and did not hesitate to invite him to return if for no other reason than to give a glance at the embroidery of the figures and devices as soon as the work had been begun. The gentleman replied to this invitation with an assent which showed affectionate condescension, but in his look and attitude there was something strange and repellent, so that Stella, who had kept herself at her table near the window, felt in her heart, though it was the heart of a dove, a sense of secret antipathy toward this man.

A week later he appeared again. He remained a longer time with the two women, and approved of everything Teresa suggested, offering to help her whenever he could, through the acquaintance he boasted with dukes, counts, and marquises, besides leading merchants and bankers. Thus he completely won the good woman's heart. She already esteemed him to be the flower of honest men. She wondered whether she might ask him to procure a good berth somewhere for her Damiano, so that she might see him contented, also, and sure of an honest wage. But she dared not mention the matter so soon.

As he was departing, the self-styled merchant at the foot of the stairs ran across Damiano, who was returning from work. The lad was coming up, and as he passed the gentleman he turned around to look at him. To his surprise he thought he recognized the Signor Omobono he had met at the feast of Shrove Tuesday.

But Signor Omobono (for it was indeed he) drew his hat down over his eyes as far as he could, and, putting his handkerchief to his mouth, as if attacked by a sudden fit of coughing, hastily lifted the bar of the door and escaped from the curious scrutiny of the lad, who, preoccupied with other thoughts, imagined that he had been mistaken, and before he reached his own door had already forgotten that face of evil omen. As to Teresa, with a reasoning customary with honest souls who be-

lieve implicitly in the honest intentions of others, she determined to say nothing as yet of the new acquaintance she had made, thinking to wait and tell Damiano everything when she could give him some good news. Even Stella, when she saw an unusual serenity on her mother's brow, said nothing to her brother, and began to doubt whether the antipathy she had experienced at the mere sight of this man might not be an unjust impression, a vain shadow, a caprice.

CHAPTER XII

BUTTERFLIES OF FASHION

HOLY THURSDAY, with its duties, had arrived. On that day which renews divine memories of the faith and sorrows of Christianity, the widow and her daughter, in accordance with the pious customs of the people, which preserve intact the holy traditions of the past, were making the regular pilgrimage to seven churches, following through the city the procession that recited devout prayers in the visits to the Sepulchers. They had raised their hearts to the God of the humble and the faithful, imploring for resignation and hope, for blessings upon their work, and the contentment of innocence. That day of austere solemnity, that long line of women, of girls, of entire families who were passing along the same path, the churches crowded with people kneeling and praying, the very fatigue of walking, the comfort of prayer, and the consciousness of a pious duty fulfilled, had instilled into their minds a quiet joy which they had not tasted for a long time.

Having emerged from the Duomo, a little before evening, they returned home, talking on the way of Damiano, who for several days had been much more cheerful than

formerly. Suddenly Stella perceived that two strangers were following them. For a while they walked behind the women from street to street; then they walked beside them, and sometimes went ahead, staring them in the face as they passed, and conversing without caring whether they were overheard or not. Stella recalled that even in the cathedral, while she was praying beside her mother, one of these men had accosted her, making gestures and whispering words which she could not understand. And while this one had followed her into the Duomo, the other had waited under the arch of the Coperto de' Figini. When the women came out, the pair rejoined each other and walked along arm in arm. At first Stella had hardly noticed this, but now it attracted her attention; she could not help hearing behind her explosions of laughter, and speeches which wounded her ears. She trembled like a leaf, and feeling herself weakening, she caught hold of her mother, who, thinking that she was merely tired, and suspecting nothing, said:

"Take heart, Stella, we are nearly home."

Even if the girl had not guessed that the two men were dogging her steps to find out where she lived, the words that passed between them would have enlightened her. They were two young gentlemen, dressed elegantly in the fashion of the day, two of the stripe of fellows that walk up and down in most frequented streets, with the air of conquerors, at the hour when people are most abroad, and especially toward twilight, hoping that good fortune may direct them toward some flirtatious or mysterious beauty, pointing out to one another those who would or would not pay attention to them, well-dressed and accomplished seekers of amusement and adventure, two of those that welcome anything that satisfies their caprices, who hold themselves alone among human kind as *comme il faut*, to use one of their favorite expressions, and who take no pains to think either before or after they act.

"But, dear Lodovico," said one, dragging himself along as if he followed his friend against his will, "it must be acknowledged that you make a good appearance."

He that spoke was himself a type of the gilded youth of the period. In his oiled hair, his waxed moustaches tapering to a point, the studied tie of his cravat, his fine coat, the yellow gloves, the self-satisfied air, the triumphant step, one recognized the would-be lady-killer.

"Listen a bit, Count," said the other, who also was dressed in the last extreme of fashion, although he did not show the open arrogance which might be clearly read in the face of his companion. He had his reasons for apostrophizing his friend, half in jest and half in earnest, by the title of count—it was a gentle titillation to the vanity of that young paladin.

"And what can you tell me that I do not know? You are mortally tired of Lent and seek some distraction."

"Yes, in making a little Madonna out of everyone that we see, my boy."

"And you wish me to lend you a helping hand, eh? So you have dragged me by force as far as this at the very hour when I expect to meet a young person at the door of the café, whom I was to accompany to the rehearsal of the new ballet."

"A young person? Tut, tut, Count Achilles, for a friend's sake you might once in a while take the risk of her pulling your ears for your tardiness."

"But not of scratching my face."

"Ah! Ah! all the same you are already marked by those four little talons of the ballet-girl."

"How you talk!"

"Come, now! doesn't everybody know that you have been her friend for three years, and that you are as jealous as if she were a great lady! Yes, indeed, and to retain her good graces you have to go down on your knees to her? Away with your pretenses! You cut a pretty figure!"

"I do not understand you. Don't you know that I am playing the grand seigneur?"

"Oh, yes, indeed—making an antechamber of the stage-door, giving one arm to the girl, another to her chatterbox of a mother, playing the lackey to the carriages of sin, while that bevy of nymphs remain at home, and ascending the box beside the greasy coachman."

"You are crazy!" answered the Count with a grin. "I know well that envy alone makes you speak in this fashion. But away with such nonsense! I can't get angry with you. Now tell me what are we to do about this little witch?"

"Come behind here that I may see where her home is. I'll advise you later. You know that I have better taste than you. I love the flowers of springtime, the rose-buds"—

"I'll believe it, if you wish me to, but milliners and shop-girls are no longer in fashion. At Paris they are toys for students and provincials. I have no use for such baggage; when I had them within reach I did not care about them."

"What the devil! Everybody to his fancy; yours is the stage, mine is the shop; thus we shall always be friends. But listen, Count. You do not know that my father"—

"What new trick is he playing? Will he not pay your debts?"

"That would be the least evil. I could find a remedy for that. Guess again."

"Is it true that he is playing the stern parent?"

"He wishes to present me with a wife."

"The old tyrant! And will you accept her?"

"What can I do? He has not yet said either yes or no, because old people, as you know, wish to have their own way, and my father, who up to this moment has held my nose to the grindstone, with his antediluvian ideas of order, of economy and system, is ruining me, is

driving me into a rapid consumption. Marriage might serve a good turn. I should be my own master, and besides, she is really a magnificent *partie*, the daughter of a great house, not at all bad-looking, they tell me, with two hundred thousand lire in hand. You see there is matter for consideration here."

"Ha! ha! ha! Lodovico in search of a wife! Good for him! To-night at the café, I shall make our friends laugh."

"For the love of heaven! Swear that you won't breathe a word of it, or I shall take it in bad part."

"Poor fellow! They order and you obey. Come now, I do not envy you. I am free, independent; I have no one to preach morality to me, and I can truly say that I enjoy life. Still, I can understand that as these blessed fathers do exist"—

"What can I do? He wishes me too well. He wishes to get rid of me soon. And I, must I wait until I am forty before I can do as I wish, continuing meanwhile, like every wretched son of a great family, on a miserable pittance which hardly suffices to buy me sherbets and gloves?"

"I pity you. But if you have to swallow a wife"—

"What matter? I really don't care much; on the contrary, I tell you in confidence that I am ready to satisfy the old gentleman."

"What, my dear young gentleman? Take a wife and still be unwilling to give up the pastime of chasing little milliners?"

"I do not yet bear the matrimonial yoke, and without a little consolation how can I face the evil day?"

"I see that you are a *mauvais sujet*. But who is the bride?"

"The eldest daughter of Baron Alberto; a baroness, you understand, but nobody must know it for the present."

"As to the bride, she's not so bad; she's not a devil.

Listen! I now exact from you a promise to present me to her, and I will promise to comfort her, while you are running after petticoats of striped percale."

"Very well, you madcap; we shall see, but don't make me lose track of this"—

"Oh, we are good sleuths, and besides the prey is willing to leave its nest."

"Ah, she is my sort, my passion!"

"Good luck to you!"

Little of this foul talk reached Stella's ears, but she gathered enough to be aware of the danger she was exposed to, and to know the reason why the pair were following her. Until that day no hint of anything of this sort ever had penetrated into her chaste soul. At sixteen years of age, feminine modesty, that refuge of virtue trembling for itself, never had been agitated in her angelic heart, but a few words from two evil-minded youths had sufficed to tear away the veil from her perturbed thoughts.

In her first alarm, the thought occurred to her to tell her mother that before returning home they should stop for a moment, at a shop not far off, in quest of work that had been promised her. She said this in the hope that the pair might lose track of her and give up the chase. But, as she could hardly find words to explain her meaning, the mother paid no heed to her, deeming it a mere caprice, and unaware that anything unusual had happened. Tired as she was, she wished only to reach home as soon as possible. Stella was forced to resign herself, so they entered their own door.

The two young gentlemen paused, exchanging smiles and glances, and pointing at Stella as she ascended the stairs with her mother. At that moment Damiano, arriving from the other side, came face to face with the pair, who, nodding and pointing at the girl, seemed to suggest some bet they had made concerning her.

In a twinkling the brother understood, and leaping into

the entrance he shoved aside one of the gallants, who stood at the threshold. Signor Lodovico, against whom he had pushed, turned around full of astonishment and anger.

"What are you doing, you scoundrel?" he asked.

"And you," answered Damiano, planting himself in front of him, "what are you doing here?"

"Oh, splendid! splendid!" laughed Count Achilles.

"Go about your business!" exclaimed the Cavaliere Lodovico, "or I will teach you."

But Damiano, pale with anger, seized his arm and in a voice trembling with emotion said:

"Those two women are my mother and my sister, and if I ever find you here again, look out for yourself."

So saying, he took a good look at him and rapidly followed his mother up the stairs.

"He's crazy!" said the Count.

"Crazy and insolent," his companion added. "What do you think of him? He's some ass of a workman who is making love to the girl and thinks he can scare me. But I laugh at him, now my spirit is aroused. This is an adventure that piques my self-esteem. Oh, we shall see, and you, my dear Count, mark my words."

The two friends separated, with another handshake. One of them went to make a tour of the theaters, where his patrician name and the friendship of the impresario admitted him freely to the presence of the beautiful daughters of the air, as he poetically styled the ballet-girls. The other went to pay a visit of ceremony to the aristocratic lady who was shortly to be his bride.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DIVINE SPARK KINDLES

NOWADAYS Damiano at break of day was always on his way, alert and cheerful, to the studio of the painter Costanzo.

But what secret hope had kindled in Damiano that joy, that ardor of life and of will, which he had not felt for a long time? A few days before he was not really living; his mind was oppressed with anxious and reluctant thoughts. The men and the things that surrounded him had irritated and saddened him. He had imagined that he was alone and neglected, uncertain where to turn; wearied, borne down by poverty from which he deemed it impossible to raise his family. But now the world was no longer what it had been to him—an immense and mysterious injustice. All was changed. Everything took on a new significance, new reason, and now for the first time he felt the fulness of life throbbing in his veins. He would not now have exchanged for any treasures the emotion that warmed his heart.

Poor, honest Damiano! That which so many others experience at twenty years of age through the strength of a first passion of love, Damiano then felt for a sentiment higher and purer, which, long alight in his soul, had at last after many dreams of fancy found an expression of beauty in a true and living form. It was a strong and solitary love, a flaming inspiration which, for the first time, gave him a sense of the infinite.

He walked with a light step. The streets and the houses that he saw every day, which had seemed to him monotonous and ugly and suggestive of poverty, put on a new appearance that morning. He found them beautiful, light, cheerful. He saw a friend in everybody he met, and felt a desire to shake hands with all the labor-

ers and artisans who passed him, making for the factory or shop, and explain his joy to them. He imagined that the greater number of these good people were poorer than he, but that all should be, like himself, joyful and serene, for all were his brothers.

Mounting to the fifth floor, where the painter lived, he found him dressed in his linen shirt and with the faithful cap of blue paper upon his bald head, standing beside the open window intent on mixing colors to lay upon his palette. From the window, which looked out upon a long row of roofs, one could see the roofs of half the city. Through that multitude of spires and skylights, of little towers and belfries which in the distance resembled a handful of soldiers scattered over an unequal and wooded soil, the oblique and vivid rays of the newly risen sun darted with singular reflections of light. A fresh and subtle air had driven from every part of the sky the vapors of the night, and the first smile of the sun was for the studio of the poor painter.

The good Costanzo, on the lad's appearance, assumed a more serene expression and shook him heartily by the hand. "Here you are," he cried, "in company with the sun, which salutes me. Good lad, you have heart and will; you know that time is a treasure and you do not waste it, so you will succeed in something, and you will do better with your life than I have done with mine. Come, come, your big canvas is awaiting you."

"I love you well, Costanzo, as your poor son used to love you well," answered the youth. "You alone have been my master. The little that I know I have learned from you."

Placing his hand upon the heart of his master, he gazed upon him with deep tenderness, and added after a pause, "Do you really think that I"—

"On my soul, I am certain. It is as true as I live that you have here"—and he placed his right hand first on the lad's heart and then on his brow—"something that

comes from above. I always sought for it in myself, but I never found it. Look you, I am sincere. I estimate myself correctly. My fifty-nine years, if they have taught me nothing else, have taught me that much truth."

"Don't say that, good Costanzo. The fates were against you, and that is the reason."

"Yes, that is the reason why I am up here among the cats, and all the nearer to heaven," interrupted the painter with a smile.

"But you are honest and generous; you are a good artist, and the few who know you love you with all their hearts."

"Oh, for me it's all ended. I am old. All my portraits and all those heads of saints daubed during these many years have not made me a name more famous than that of the tobacconist over yonder at the corner. But, after all, I have been to Rome! Oh, yes! I can now die content. I too have seen the glories of Italian art—of our art. And I have seen those pictures which had been the dream of all my life. But you are young, Damiano; you will see them in time, my friend; and if the art-pilgrimage deprived me of my last hope, it will give you courage and inspiration."

"Oh, what can I do, Costanzo? To-day I am content and full of faith, but only too soon a certain presentiment at the bottom of my heart will befog my brain and unnerve my courage. In the midst of joy, in the holiest hour, a malign and ironical voice seems to be saying to me, 'Don't imagine the impossible, it will always be the same; everything is useless.'"

"Ah, boy! boy! your soul is afire and you burn up the future, because you haven't got it in your hand. But I have the experience, and, comparing what you have done with what I have done, I say with my heart in my hand that I am a poor stick, while you are a painter."

"You love me well. That's why you talk this way, but no one else will speak as you do. I feel it within

myself—art is too great, my strength is too slight. But my hopes are the only things that can comfort my life. I will follow the enchantment that lures me on, and if I fall in the middle of the way I can say that my hope was not a mean one and that I too have wished greatly.”

“Thus it was, perhaps, that they talked, they at whose name we must now take off our hats and bend our heads. But don’t grow proud on that account. The way is long and life is short, but you are my son by adoption, and you will not forget the name of the old Costanzo. Come here, my son,” and the good man almost forcibly embraced him and kissed his forehead. Then he resumed, “Don’t let us lose any more time. The hours fly, and rob us of thoughts and years, so now let us to work.”

“Yes, master, my friend, to work! and may God be with us!” answered Damiano.

And the two friends, gathering their brushes and taking the mahl-sticks and the palettes, placed themselves before their easels. Costanzo, on the one side of the window, faced an old canvas under which a sketch of Saint Andrew of Avellino was gradually disappearing under a portrait recently ordered—a fat, ruddy face, two little gray eyes without any eyebrows, a mouth opened in a stupid smile, and a double chin, in short, the physiognomy of a shop-keeper who had made money in oil and soap. On the other side, Damiano was stationed in front of an ample canvas on whose fresh surface could be seen the bold outlines of the beautiful creation which had for so long a time occupied his ardent fancy. Several sketches of the same picture, vividly colored, and expressing lively emotions, were scattered here and there under a chair and on a round table. An old volume of Tasso lay open on a stool at his feet. But the lad was not looking at these sketches, the first glowing essays of an inexperienced hand possibly too much swayed by enthusiasm. He silently placed himself al-

most with a religious awe in front of the canvas. He gazed at it with his soul rather than with his eyes; he studied those lines lightly traced, the profiles, the heads, the movements of the figures, which now appeared only like phantoms in a fog, but which he in his mind already saw breathing and living. He drew a deep sigh, and with a trembling hand gave the first touch of the brush to his picture.

This picture, as might have been gathered from the book which lay at the foot of the easel, depicted one of the finest and most moving episodes of Torquato's poem, where the lovelorn Erminia, making a pilgrimage in desert parts, finds her Tancred dying. The volume was opened at the page containing these beautiful stanzas, which once read never can be forgotten:

"Receive my yielded spirit, and with thine
 Guide it to heaven, where all true love hath place."
 This said, she sigh'd and tore her tresses fine,
 And from her eyes two streams pour'd on his face.
 The man, revived with those showers divine,
 Awak'd and opened his lips a space;
 His lips were open, but fast shut his eyes,
 And with her sighs one sigh from him up-flies.

The dame perceiv'd that Tancred breath'd and sight,
 Which calm'd her grief some deal and eas'd her fears.
 "Unclose thine eyes," she says, "my lord and knight,
 See my last services, my plaints, my tears;
 See her that dies to see thy woful plight,
 That of thy pain her part and portion bears;
 Once look on me, small is the gift I crave,
 The last which thou canst give, or I can have."

Tancred look'd up, and clos'd his eyes again,
 Heavy and dim, and she renew'd her wo.
 Quoth Vafrene: "Cure him first and then complain,
 Med'cine is life's chief friend, plaint her worst foe."
 They pluck'd his armor off, and she each vein,
 Each joint, and sinew felt and handled so,
 And search'd so well each thrust, each cut, and wound.
 That hope of life her love and skill soon found.

From weariness and loss of blood she spy'd
 His greatest pains and anguish most proceed,
 Naught but her veil amid those deserts wide
 She had to bind his wounds in so great need;

But love could other hands, though strange, provide,
And pity wept for joy to see that deed,
For with her amber locks, cut off, each wound
She tied. O happy man, so cur'd, so bound!

Damiano, constrained by poverty and by the necessity of finding immediately a sure wage in order to share it with his mother and sister, had until then been obliged to renounce his natural inclination for painting, to which under other circumstances he might perhaps have consecrated himself entirely. Never having frequented the public schools of the fine arts, he had remained until this day the unknown pupil of an unknown painter. He had given to his studies in drawing the hours stolen from his school-books, from the shopkeeper's ledger, from his sleep at night, and he did this more because of the strong and simple love he bore to art than because of any faith in his success. But meanwhile, with his solitary and tranquil application, with the intense and secret will-power, which sprang from an inborn instinct for beauty, and which is best matured under difficulties, the lad was little by little, almost without knowing it, initiating himself into the sublime mysteries of art.

An uneasiness, an overwhelming desire, agitated him and made his heart beat. The grand spectacle of the sky, the aspect, melancholy or serene, of the plains that surround the great city, the green of the trees and of the well-tilled fields, the scattered houses, the few remains of a great past that still survive within the circle of the walls, the ancient churches, the famous works of the chisels of the Lombard school, objects of wonder for those who visit a deserted chapel here, an abandoned monastery there, and that miracle of mediæval art, the cathedral, where the good lad used to go to meditate in his hours of bitter melancholy, all gave him ineffable thoughts and emotions in the peaceful bosom of the family, in the tumult of the piazza, in the agita-

tion of the people; and in the midst of all this he felt proud that he had been born and had been allowed to mingle in it. In short, everything that surrounded him had taught him the only knowledge that is of value to an artist—the harmony and variety of nature and the mystery of beauty. For the language of nature is never mute for the soul stirred by divine instincts. Art is the daughter of nature, and through the medium of imitation she translates truth to the senses.

CHAPTER XIV

A DANGEROUS FRIEND

IN Damiano's heart, therefore, a great passion had been born. But it would have taken quite another man than our good Costanzo to aid him in attempting that flight for which he believed himself created, one who from the first would have recognized in the lad's ecstasies and torments, in his sufferings, in the doubts and terrors of his soul, the symptoms of an idea that had agitated himself, and which, often stronger than the mind in which it dwells, cannot issue thence without breaking the seal.

The idea may be life, it may be death.

No one had read in the young man's eyes, in his pale and thoughtful visage, the secret of his heart; no one had ever spoken to him the word of revelation, one of those words that suffice to change the destiny of a man. He felt, loved, studied, in the sole hope of doing something that might liberate him from the lowly sphere in which he could barely breathe. While reading his favorite poets, drawing, sketching faces and figures, he felt a little less unhappy, nothing more.

This, however, might be the decisive moment of his whole life. The one fixed thought that had tormented

him for some time, to make trial for once of that inner force which yearns to exploit itself, was a vocation, was a necessity. With the joy and the grief that shook his soul, how much of enthusiasm and of discomfort, of faith and of doubt he experienced are things that could not be described or understood save by one who knows that it is possible to live or to die for an idea.

Not yet was Damiano fully persuaded that he had received from God the dolorous gift of genius. He did not yield implicit credence to the words of Costanzo. The latter, proud of his only pupil, was already predicting that when Damiano had made a great name, his own also would not be forgotten. The lad was aware of this childlike vanity, but instead of accepting it as a good omen it was for him only a fresh source of doubt, of new torments. He promised himself, however, that he would set to work all the more diligently in order to satisfy the little weaknesses of his master, and respond in this fashion to the affection of the good old man. And when he stood before that canvas, which was awaiting life from his hand, when he began to revolve the subject in his mind, and opened the volume over which he had wept from his childhood, dreaming dear visions of love and of beauty, Damiano understood that he would never again find peace until the picture should be finished.

So several months passed, and the great thoughts that shook his spirit, and those images of Erminia and of Tancred, and of their singer, which besieged him night and day, had plunged him into such deep and silent contemplation that his mother and sister, knowing nothing of what he held shut within his heart, saw in his mysterious manner the presage of some great evil. At last, when, after long uncertainty, he felt that the clouds of his own creating were melting away, he began to grow a little calmer, to put on a serener aspect. At such times he seemed to have thrown off his old self; with spontaneous transports of joy, he would run affectionately

into the arms of his mother, and kiss Stella with unusual tenderness; and she would look at him, not knowing what to think, more terrified by such strange demonstrations of love than by his habitual sadness,

But he still trembled at the thought of revealing his secret; until the work was finished he swore to keep it jealously. From Costanzo he exacted a promise that he would tell no living soul, and the good man kept his word. In the mean while, at night, in the silence of his room, he re-read his *Jerusalem Delivered*, and secretly drew sketches for his composition. And when the time had come, he threw himself into his work with the same emotion, with the same religious sense that was experienced by the greatest of our painters in the olden times.

In those days of Holy Week, around which our story revolves at present, the schools of the lyceum were closed, so that in a short time Damiano was able to cover his entire canvas with figures. Costanzo wondered at the rapidity and the simple fashion with which, little by little, the lad disposed of the different parts of his work, and began to understand the idea that underlay it.

But when these few happy days had passed, wherein the heart of Damiano was divorced from this world, the hard necessities of life fell more heavily upon him; want, with a hand of iron, conducted him back every evening to the office of the draper, to place upon his big ledgers of debit and credit cipher after cipher, bills, accounts, exchanges—it was his martyrdom. But he was rewarded for the sacrifice when at the end of the month, he put twenty lire in his mother's hands, the scanty fruits of his toil, and reminded himself that very soon, on leaving school, he would either be able to dedicate himself entirely to his beloved art, or he would have succeeded in smuggling himself into some obscure corner of an office, with a modest but certain salary.

Meanwhile, perturbed and uncertain, he continued the

work he had begun. The rising sun found him in front of his picture, from which he did not tear himself until the stroke of nine. Then, throwing down his brushes and his palette, he ran precipitately toward the school, sometimes with tears in his eyes. But in this constant war between sentiment and duty, between daily need and the great aspirations of his soul, the poor lad grew thinner and more melancholy. Neither Teresa nor Stella could have understood the reason of his suffering; their days and weeks passed calmly away; they were resigned to their steady monotonous work, with that patient hope of souls made the one for the other.

Teresa, as by this time you are well aware, was a good woman; nothing more. The happiness that Victor had brought her, a happiness which, in truth, he distributed with a certain pride, a certain soldierly hauteur, had been her only glory. Now that she had lost him, though her tenderness for her three children had increased, she could not find in herself the necessary strength to sustain alone the buffetings of fate. Old age was approaching, and her heart, weak by nature and still further enfeebled by time, felt the weight of her new labors, whose gravity was increased by the memories of the past and the force of old habits. She loved her sons; she took pride in the flower-like grace of Stella; she would have surrendered for Damiano, and still more readily for Celso, what little remained to her of life; but in the inexperience of an ingenuous life, she could not understand the agonies of self-sacrifice that afflicted the soul of Damiano, who, despite his strength, chafed at the necessity of self-humiliation, nor the perils that surrounded young girlhood in poverty. Submissive and pious, she had accepted without complaint her condition, such as it was; but, though she had indeed lived for a long time in straitened circumstances, she never had been pressed by necessity, and did not yet imagine what real poverty means. Meantime, the noble con-

stancy of Damiano and the serenity of Stella kept up her courage, and she consoled herself with the hope that in a few years she might be reunited to her beloved Celso, whom she already saw in imagination as a coadjutor or a curate. The dearest of her dreams was to find herself reestablished in a home in that part of Milan which had seen her young and happy, where she might every morning go to hear her son say mass at the altar of the Madonna of San Celso, and then to die there in the Via Quadronno, so that she might be borne to the cemetery of Gentilino, not far from her Victor.

But Stella, with her sixteen years, with her innocent and secure faith, went to meet life without complaint, without pain. She secretly guessed what was passing in her mother's heart, and she had even some suspicion of the agonies that Damiano suffered. Her gentle manners and that affectionate insight which belongs to good and simple hearts had taught her how to lighten and shorten the hours of weariness for her mother and her brother, and how to instil cheerfulness into the dumb alternatives of work and poverty. Often, sitting at her work-table, she would sing some song with a clear and limpid voice, a song whose joy was not really present in her heart.

The dawn saw her already risen. Opening the window a little, she would kneel down in a corner to pray. A ray of light, penetrating the small window, would descend to illuminate her. Then she would place herself at her work-table while her mother still slept. In order to earn money, she would embroider flowers, festoons, and garlands in those transparent fabrics that catch the eye.

Even to her, Damiano did not wish to reveal the great purpose to which he had pledged himself. So one morning when, amid smiles and blushes, she inquired whether he were in love, that he slept so little and went out before sunrise, "Yes, Stella," he replied, "and with a

beauty so great that it may craze me or kill me." But he immediately added that she must not mind what he said; that it was not true, and that in fact he went out to read his books in the open air. So saying he looked fixedly at his sister. One would have said that he was studying her pure lineaments, her blue eyes, her delicate eyebrows, her lips redder than coral, and the perfect oval of her face. It was with an artist's passion that he was seeking, in the expression of that dear face, the model for his portrait of Erminia.

When her brother had gone, the girl listened attentively for the tinkling of the bell of some milkman's horse, and descended to the door of the house to purchase for breakfast a small measure of milk, still warm from the cow. By this time Teresa also was up, and a little later the two rooms had become so clean and sweet that one could not help loving this decent and honest poverty. On Damiano's return they all took breakfast together. They talked of poor Victor, of Celso, of Signor Lorenzo, of all the little happenings that diversified their humble life. Then Damiano went back to school, and the women to their needle or their distaff, until the hour arrived for dinner, which Teresa insisted on taking under her special care. After dinner, as usual, the boy walked over to the shop and the women returned to their work by the windows. At evening, if Damiano were at leisure, he would sit with them and read aloud some old volume of our history or design fancy-work and embroidery for Stella. Thus their days passed, all alike, humbly but tranquilly, and linked together by the love that united their hearts in suffering and in hope.

Seldom did any neighbor come in to help Teresa in her household cares, or to discuss the affairs of others. Even Signor Lorenzo allowed himself to be seen more rarely than ever, either because the stress of years was beginning to tell upon him, or because he held himself

in leash against his own feelings, ever since Celso's future had been decided upon. The former lieutenant had never been able to get along with either priests or friars. Sometimes when he was in the humor for story telling he would remember with great glee the convent walls that he had scaled in other days and in other countries, the cellars of priors that he had drunk dry with the assistance of his comrades, and moneys and censers seized as prizes of war. Besides, the old soldier had formed certain ideas about his friend's sons, and, because of what they had said and done without giving ear to him, he had sworn to wash his hands of them. Still, when he remembered this old companion, and the last night he had spent with him, he could not feel it in his heart to do this.

Thus Victor's honest family lived, awaiting a little good fortune in the future. But they were not sufficiently unknown and obscure in the eyes of the wicked. Those who work evil keep vigil in the shadow, the good suspect nothing, and over them is only the eye of God.

Signor Omobono had not forgotten the poor widow, nor laid aside his rascally designs. He did not know, however, that another, cleverer and more audacious than he, had crossed his path. This was Lodovico. Fate, often less incomprehensible than the wickedness of man, had so ordered it that this young cavalier, like Omobono, had betaken him to the old huckster to help him in making acquaintance with the pretty girl.

The old huckster who knew how to close an eye on this sort of business, and feigned compassion for girls that stumbled, knew how to keep at bay both Omobono and the fine young gentleman, taking good care not to tell either one or the other the things she had noticed. Furthermore, with an evil delight in intrigue, which was her politics, she began to think that the old man or the young might be led to trip up seriously, and that the girl, not being a fool, might come out victorious.

Emerenziana, among all the women of the neighborhood, was the one who came most often to visit Teresa and to bring her work. Two days never passed that she did not return like a quartan fever, to play at superior knowledge with the widow, who gave ear to her only too readily.

She gossiped over the secrets of the quarter. Ladies or peasants, shopgirls or factory-girls, all were fish that came to her net. She would hint, with certain reticences, and always with the air of one who was in the confessional, at the intrigues and entanglements in which she was implicated, but always, as she declared, with a good end in view. And indeed this dealer in second-hand clothes and furniture knew of secret doings of all kinds, and for a glass of wine would give instructions as to how to avoid being cheated.

She was in her glory in the hour when the two women were alone. She had recognized at first sight of Damiano, on that carnival night when he had come to her house, that he would not easily allow himself to be ensnared, and willingly avoided meeting him. Even Stella, though still unsuspecting, was not awed by the grand airs assumed by this woman of perpetual promises; but, ignorant of the artifices and of the petty infamies of Emerenziana, she allowed herself, somewhat against her judgment, to believe, in part if not entirely, in the truth and sincerity of what she heard, being deceived by that air of frank good nature which the woman knew how to assume in word and act.

For Teresa, on the other hand, the best reason and the best proof of the woman's friendship was the work which from day to day she brought her in increasing quantities. It was not paid for grudgingly nor stingily; she never had to wait for the money, and in two short months she had been able to lay aside a nest-egg of two hundred lire. Damiano was little pleased when he heard of what his mother was doing. But Teresa would

not be persuaded, and once, when Damiano gave her a piece of his mind because she had allowed Stella to go into Emerenziana's house, she broke into wild sobs and used words toward her son which he never had thought could issue from the lips of his mother. She told him that he was a dreamer, that he had a wicked heart, and that if he wished to order things to be done in his own way, he might think a little more than he had thought about the family.

These things pained Damiano. He bent his head and said nothing. From that day the name of the old huckster never crossed his lips. He left the house at sunrise, as before, but he never returned until late at night, eating then what his sister had put aside for him. Less respectful and more taciturn than he had been, he avoided his mother's eye, and she suffered in consequence.

Thus vanished those few joys which his youthful hopes and the first ardor of his art-worship had rekindled for him. At last, disgust gave way to reason. One night he flung himself into the arms of his mother, and begged to be pardoned and blessed.

CHAPTER XV

A SERIOUS COUNCIL

FOR centuries the world has seen the strong fighting against the weak. This war is the same that is now being waged between the rich and the poor, and it may last as long as the world lasts. The continuous mutations in affairs disguise but they cannot alter human passions; but, gazing on this kaleidoscopic spectacle, we bestow our affection rather on goodness than on greatness.

At the door of an old palace, situated in a lonely part of Milan, a carriage of ancient fashion stopped one day

after dinner. Two persons who exchanged solemn greetings were seen to descend. As the saying is, they must have been big fish, to judge by the ample hat, an equilateral triangle in shape, and the cape of the one, and the powdered wig and pompous bearing of the other. Having crossed the deserted court, they ascended by a triumphal staircase, adorned with maimed and dusty statues representing the gods of Olympus, to the spacious antechamber. The only servant of the house, who had been asleep four hours, leaped up from his bench, startled by their appearance. As soon as he had recognized them, he ran before them to throw open the door of the inner apartments, and having announced them, he admitted to the secret cabinet of his most noble mistress the Councilor Zebedia and Father Apollinaris.

The Countess Cunegonda, sister of the Illustrissimo, that potent dame whom he himself, as you may remember, held in almost as much respect as a minister of state, moved with dignity toward the two gentlemen, and with an almost regal gesture invited them to sit down.

"I was expecting you, gentlemen," began the Countess; "you know well how deeply I have at heart the good and holy work in which you are lending me a hand. If there are many obstacles, there are many merits to be won and"—

"The Countess is an incomparable woman!" said the father; "your lofty and exemplary piety, Signora, your Christian sentiments, the riches you have consecrated to the triumph of morality; your faithful adherence"—

"Eh, father," the lady interrupted, "we are still very much behindhand; we must fight and fight again; the weeds grow every day and the fruits are few."

"Nevertheless, something has been done, something has been gained," said the Councilor suggestively.

"Yes, yes! but other things are wanted," said the priest, a little tartly.

"Look, for example, at my most worthy brother," resumed the lady; "it was impossible to persuade him to assume the charge we wished to give him. I attempted it several times, but it was like talking to a deaf man."

"A pity!" put in the father, "a real pity! His name was so much needed."

"As to me, I confess," said the lady, "that, although in obedience to your wise advice, I made the advances to him that you deemed necessary, he was not persuaded to extend to us his coöperation. Let us leave him alone, I say it frankly; my brother is a good man, but he is not one of us. He has certain ideas, certain principles, to tell the truth, which are not appropriate at his age. You see that I speak unreservedly; let us do without him."

"Be it as you will, Countess," said the Councilor, bowing.

"But," added his colleague, "I hope at least that the chief promise will be kept. You know the large expenses we have endorsed; they are growing every day. The Retreat founded some time ago through your distinguished charity has need of protection, of funds."

"Be assured, good father, that we will not fail in our duty so long as the Lord gives us grace," said the Countess slowly, with an accent that changed in a moment from self-conceit to humility, as a musical note might change from major to minor.

"By the way," she resumed, "what news is there of your protégé, the young cleric you received into your house?"

"Of my protégé?" answered Father Apollinaris. "Say rather of yours, Countess! I never could have done what little I have been able to do for him without your assistance."

"Oh, no, no! The little pension I give him is a mere trifle; it is nothing to the treasure he has in you!"

"Don't make me blush, I beg!" said the good father.

"You know, Signor Councilor," explained the Countess, turning to the latter, "that our good father, whom God preserve forever, finds himself in a sea of affairs and difficulties; that is only natural; he would do good to everybody. Now, he has thought that he would have need of a secretary, a person who could be confided in, one of his own kind, rarely to be found. Chance brought him in contact with a youth who promises well, who can and must succeed; this youth is poor, the father took him under his charge and intends to provide for his future; I, as is just, supplement this with the small pension of which we were speaking, and thus we do two good deeds at once."

"I knew something about this," said the Councilor, "and it is always a consolation to me to hear mention of a good action."

"I may tell you, Countess," said Father Apollinaris, "that in this lad's family there is still some good to be done. It is one of those families which, like thousands of others, are beginning to feel a species of marasmus, of moral disintegration, the fruit of certain subversive and explosive doctrines which for more than half a century have been diffused throughout Europe, parasites of the social system which every day send out more roots and take up more territory. Those who sacrificed themselves to the conservation of constituted powers, those who train the unshakable, incontrovertible batteries of order against the felonious bands of modern progress, have combated it and will combat it. They know that it is necessary to foresee and to forestall."

The lady and the Councilor listened in ecstatic attention to the words pouring like rivers of honey out of this champion of the party of inertia: the one, nodding her pyramidal headdress, and the other his powdered wig, seemed to be keeping time to them.

"But, however we may combat it," continued the

father, getting more and more excited, "the enemy does not weary and always finds arms and offenses. Much as we have advanced beyond the infernal levity that bubbled so fatally at the end of the last century, not all that was then lost has been reconquered. The evil exists, and beware, it breeds corruption! Not to delay too long on so sad a path, you may see in this little family of which we were speaking a choice example. An old soldier, half a renegade, a friend of the dead father, wishes to rule it according to his own caprices; he has already ruined the mind of the eldest son, a madcap from whom it is impossible to expect anything. By the blessing of heaven, we were in time to save the younger one, that lad in whom our most worthy Countess has deigned to take an interest. But it would not take much to end this; with a single thread that Jacobin of a brother might overturn all our work. There is a daughter, too, who has just reached the dangerous age. Surrounded by a weak mother, a lightheaded brother, and an old sinner, her honesty is endangered. But we will not weary in the good work; we will watch in the hour when the lion roars, is it not true, Countess? Let us remember what has been said—We also must be fishers of men."

"Truly, now, it seems to be a question of fishing for a woman," the Councilor Zebedia could not refrain from saying.

The Countess smiled; the father looked serious.

"Now," resumed the lady, "for other and more important things. Let us pass into my study, and I will show you the results of our correspondence at home and abroad, so arranged that you may understand at a glance where I need your advice."

She rose from the couch, and, preceding her two acolytes with imperturbable dignity, disappeared in the penetralia of the palace.

CHAPTER XVI

DAMIANO DESTROYS THE WEB.

WHILE the three powerful allies were thus sharing important secrets with one another, and discussing the principles which, according to them, were the axles on which the earth revolved, the poor family they had deigned to take under their protection knew nothing of this severe supervision, nor of the perils which menaced them more and more closely.

"Listen, Teresa," said the old huckster, on the evening of that very day, glad to find her neighbor alone, "tomorrow there will be something to divide. I have arranged that we shall embroider all the linen belonging to the palace of that gentleman, that cavaliere you know about, and it is of a beauty—I cannot describe it, but of a marvelous beauty!"

"I believe you; my daughter and I have been up to our eyelids in work."

"But you must take care, the cavaliere has nosed out the Count—imagine! what don't men find out? It was all very well for me to say that there was no money in the house; that there was hardly enough to live on—he would not understand. In short, he concluded that the Count had made up with his aunt and would return to her, or send to her to attend to this matter. What can you expect? We came to an understanding, and tomorrow"—

"You will return then?"

"Perhaps, but I am busy up to the roots of my hair. You go, Teresa, or send Stella, if you don't wish to go yourself."

"Oh, but I don't know how to behave in the presence of a count."

"Send Stella, who is a perfect little witch, and she will get on without trouble. There is already mention of some great lady being there, and Stella ought to show herself. You and I, Teresa, would not know how to convince people of her value, but girls always succeed, isn't that true?"

When Teresa told Stella of the commission which Signora Emerenziana had secured, the girl consented without hesitation to go the next morning to the palace.

She made ready to go early, but by some chance Damiano lingered longer than usual. So, in order not to talk to him about the matter, for he knew nothing of it, she waited; all the more willingly because she had seen him biting his lip with displeasure at her mother's mention of the Signora Emerenziana. The lad noticed his sister's embarrassment, and it gave him food for thought. He took his hat, and without a word left the house. As soon as he had gone, Stella put on her veil and a little shawl of plaid wool, kissed her mother, and, telling her that she was going to call upon Emerenziana's Count, disappeared. At the foot of the stairs she did not notice Damiano, who was waiting for her unseen, and who, having allowed her to go a little ahead, followed in her steps.

Midday was striking in the city. The Cavaliere Lodovico, profiting by a curt assent from Don Ambrogio—so his father was called—had thought of inviting his most intimate friends to a magnificent collation that very morning. For three hours he had been expecting the little seamstress, and he was annoyed that she had not yet arrived. This delay upset all his plans, and he was not a little surprised at it. The most precise orders had been given, and in the expectation of being able speedily to dispose of his new conquest, he took pleasure in thinking of the story he might tell to his friends at that very banquet which was to be a sort of farewell to his bachelor life. But at the stroke of twelve, some of the invited guests had already begun to straggle in, and the

girl had not been seen. The displeasure of the young cavaliere reached its climax; half an hour later he was stammering an English oath, which was the only word he knew in that language.

Count Achilles, that fidus Achates of his, who alone had any knowledge of the secret, met his friend in the drawing-room and read discontent in his face. He interpreted it as meaning the ill-success of the intrigue, but for the present he held his peace.

In company with the bearded Count came two other gentlemen, one a young man, whose flowing cravat and careful dress showed that he also had pretensions to be a dandy of the first water; he advanced with a swagger, exchanged a warm handshake with his friend, and began to laugh that fatuous laugh which often passes for high spirits. The heir of a great house, proud of his name and the fame of his English horses, he had only recently entered the great world under the ægis of an early-matured beauty.

These gentlemen were waiting expectantly in the drawing-room, occupying chairs near the table, which was littered with rather equivocal caricatures and certain novels of the latest Parisian type. While they chatted vivaciously—looking round at the intaglios representing the most famous race-horses of the United Kingdom, which hung on the walls, amid flowers, swords and rapiers, boxing-gloves, visors and draperies, the indispensable ornaments of elegant bachelorhood—the master of the house came and went, uneasy, irritated, venting his displeasure on his servants. At last he returned to the drawing-room, and, sitting down among his friends, inquired, "Well, who is still missing?"

"You ought to know," answered Achilles, stroking his short beard with his gloved right hand, "as for myself, when I promise, I am as punctual with a friend as with a mistress."

"You say well, old fellow!" replied one of the others,

"I too, when it is a matter of a breakfast or a dinner, am as exact as a creditor."

"For whom are you waiting?" asked a third.

"Oh, to be sure," answered Lodovico, "I had forgotten; that good soul of a Martigny, our cheerful master."

"And do you think he will come?"

"Yes, to keep us in good spirits, if that be necessary."

"But who has taught him the impudence to keep us waiting?" asked the bearded Count.

"Here he comes," cried the rest, "exactly at the fashionable hour."

A servant announced Monsieur Martigny. He was neither tall nor short; his face was forbidding, and it was rendered more hideous by two singularities; he wore a monocle and he was pitted with smallpox. He came forward, bold of face and bolder of mien, amid all that elegant company. His old hat, the huge bouquet he carried and his soiled Turkish coat, buttoned up to his chin, made a strange contrast to the attire of that select youthful group. None the less he was a favorite with all, and they crowded around him, saluting him as "master." No one knew his history nor where he had been born, nor the various avocations he had followed in the world. Some even said that he had once been a friar, and that, having rid himself of the tonsure and taken up the musket, he had traveled over the greater part of Europe under various guises, until finally, having modified his original plebeian name into that of Martigny, he had somehow acquired a small fortune, and had finally arrived in Milan with a reputation as a skilful master of fence, and had succeeded in making fashionable the art of fencing with a stick.

A servant announced that breakfast was ready. The friends immediately flocked into the adjacent dining-room, seated themselves around the table, covered with bottles of rare wines and exquisite viands, and sprang to the attack, ready, from beginning to end, to do all pos-

sible honor to the *scudi* of the old dotard, so nobly spent in anticipation by his son.

But it could easily be seen that the master of the house had lost his gayety. His friends either did not notice this, or pretended not to, except the bearded Count, who now and then glanced quizzingly at his friend to make him understand that he now saw he was right in giving no credence to his amatory boastings.

Presently one of the servants, coming from the antechamber, bent down to the cavaliere's ear, to tell him something in secret. Lodovico leaped to his feet as if he had been sitting on live coals, banged his fist upon the table, in the manner of one who has taken a heroic resolve, turned to the servant, and said, "Let her in."

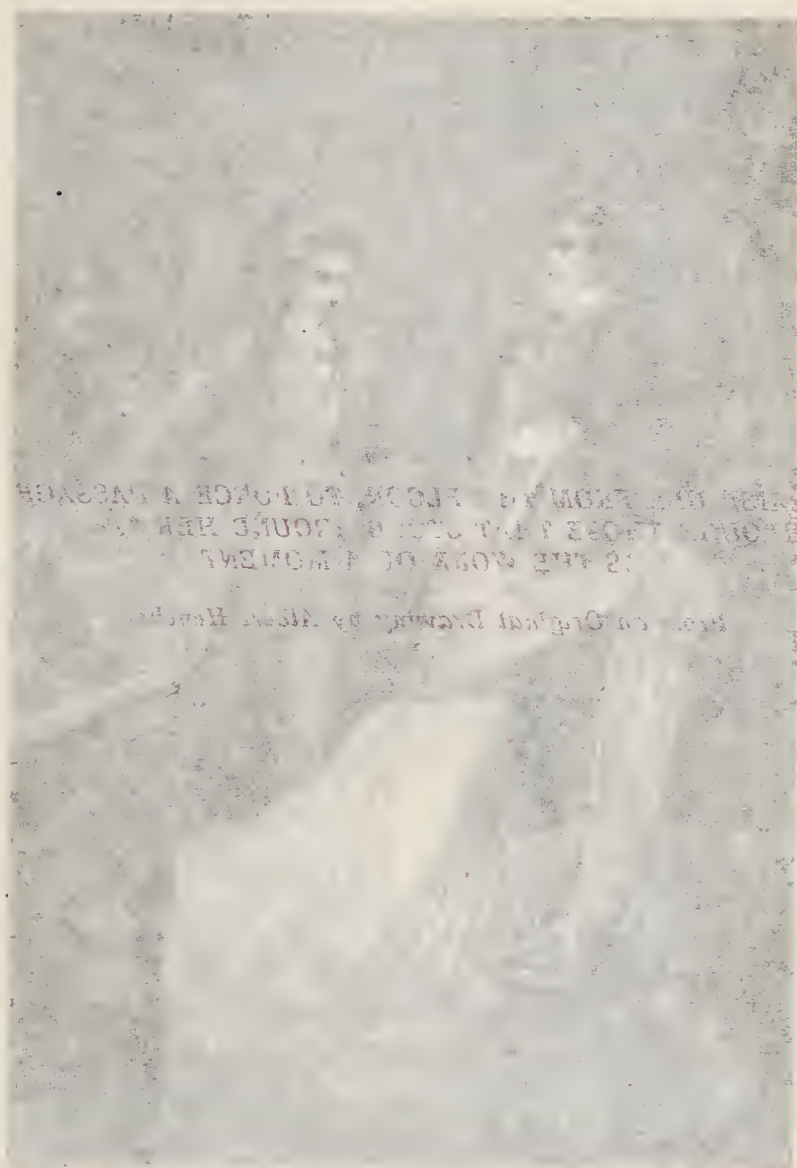
"Enter, pretty girl!" said the servant, opening the door.

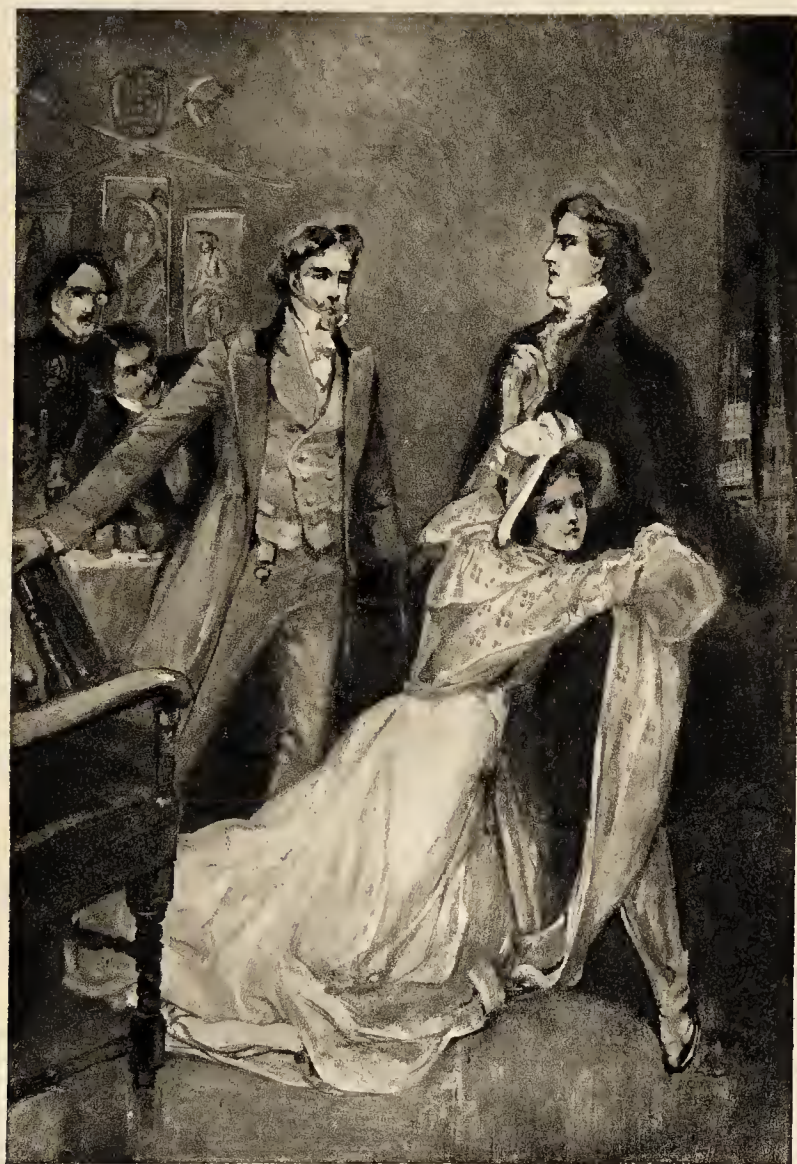
It was Stella.

As soon as the ensnared victim found herself in the company of so many people, amid all the noise and the smothered laughter, as soon as she saw those gentlemen spring up from the table and surround her to impede her escape, she gave a cry of terror and covered her face with her hands. In the midst of her fear she had recognized the pair who had so often followed her in the streets. She felt a chill in her veins, and, not finding strength either for defense or for flight, she let herself fall upon her knees.

At that very moment a noise was heard as of fighting in the antechamber. Furiously forcing his way through the crowd of servants a young man precipitated himself into the room. To run to the kneeling girl, to raise her from the floor, to force a passage among those who stood around her, not yet recovered from their first surprise, was the work of a moment.

The Cavaliere Lodovico, at this sudden apparition, lost courage and could find no word to say. Alone among all of them the wicked Martigny, who fancied that he gues-





sed the whole thing at a glance, stepped forward, and, fearing that the intrigue had gone too far, attempted to reduce this crazy interloper to reason by frightening him. But as he extended his arm to seize him, Damiano turned his shoulder to him, and approaching the door, "This is my sister," he cried; "woe to him that touches her!"

Fixing his wrathful eyes full on the face of the young cavaliere, and weighing every word, so that all could hear him: "I know you," he cried; "you are a nobleman, a rich man, but you are fit only to shake hands with scoundrels and assassins. I do not know how to hold a sword or a pistol, but I am not afraid of you, nor of your friends. I know what you have attempted! Something more than words are needed to deal with it; but all the same no one will be able to take away from you that name of caitiff, which I cast into your teeth! What do I care? If you condescend to demand satisfaction from me, I will not refuse it. I am the son of a soldier!"

Thus it was that Damiano, guided by an inspiration from heaven, arrived just in time to save her from insult and perhaps from shame. He felt in his heart that Stella was innocent; that undoubtedly she was the victim of some rascally plot. Therefore he had the courage to speak, and those few angry words of his were sufficient to dismay the insolent young man and his friends.

But just as Damiano started to leave the room the cavaliere's pent-up fury burst from his breast. Seized with sudden rage at being defied by this plebeian, he seized Martigny's stick as the first instrument ready to hand, and flew at Damiano. He would have knocked him down, but that his friends, more careful of his honor than he seemed to be himself, threw themselves upon him. Damiano, seeing him pale and sputtering with rage, looked him once more in the face and added:

"I have nothing more to say. Come, sister, the man that allows himself to be insulted deserves insult. But I am not of that sort."

With these words, he took the girl by the hand and led her out. No one dared to stop him. Stella had let her veil drop over her face and was weeping silently.

When the young plebeian had departed, it took no less than eight of the arms of those faithful friends to restrain the infuriated patrician, who was raging and howling to be set free, and crying that he would run after the audacious knave and break his bones, if for no other reason, than that he had hurled defiance at him. When he had recovered a little from the first outburst of fury, and could at his leisure hurl insults at Damiano, calling him a maniac, an imbecile and an ass, Lodovico grew calmer and seriously asked his friends whether he could fight a duel with this miscreant.

The problem was grave; they held counsel among themselves; there were many and diverse answers, some of them sufficiently strange and comical. Martigny alone, who having himself sprung from the gutter, felt his anger stirred by the bullies surrounding him, and who was rather pleased to see Damiano's courage, although he let no sign of this escape him, expressed himself strongly in the affirmative. The others ended by accepting the opinion of the young Marquis Roberto, that a gentleman could not have an affair of honor with one of the *canaille*, especially as the quarrel concerned a miserable little wench.

One opined that, after all, the cavaliere, with all his shrewdness in inveigling the girl into his house, had only anticipated an attempt in which some more fortunate person would eventually succeed, and added that he would put himself in the wrong by giving the brother satisfaction; another said that the only pity was the ill-luck that had caused the stratagem to fail; and a third, that there would be occasion for laughter in a duel of this sort, as the insults of the lower orders could be repaid only by a good beating administered at the hands of some one of their own class. In short, it

was agreed that if a thing of this sort had happened in a higher social sphere, every one of them would have known how to uphold the credit and the good name of the cavaliere.

"You are, indeed, my friends," he concluded. "Here is my hand, and as honest gentlemen let us order up more bottles."

And they reseated themselves at the table, as if nothing had happened.

But rumor, which never yet has learned to determine what things would best be kept quiet, soon divulged the curious episode in this or that conversation, in this or that café. There was more than sufficient ground for gossip; one told the tale in one way, another gave a different version, and each made his own additions and comments. The faithful friends of the cavaliere whispered the amusing details into more than one ear; the episode was colored, exaggerated; Don Lodovico came to be represented as almost a Cæsar Borgia or a Don Juan. That well-meaning dunce, Don Ambrogio, and other noble relatives scolded a little over the scandal; but afterward, in order not to interfere with the wedding, which had already been agreed upon, united in calling the affair the mere prank of a madcap brain. The parents of the prospective bride, auguring little happiness for the future from what had happened, shook their heads, but out of love and respect for the worthy Don Ambrogio, they dared not withdraw their promise. They took good care, however, that no breath of the scandal should reach their child, so as to cast no cloud on that fifteen-year-old girl, who as yet knew nothing of the world.

But the cavaliere in his secret soul trembled for many weeks; in private, at least, he did not deceive himself. He accepted as wise the advice that he should seek a change of air for a while, and a pleasure tour, made with the consent of the family of his betrothed, along

the romantic shores of the Rhine as far as Baden, and a beggarly two thousand francs which he lost there at the gaming-tables to a Russian count and an English baronet, wiped from his memory all that had happened. Returning to the paternal arms, toward the middle of autumn, he made a visit of ceremony to the parents of his fiancée, who were delighted by the elegance of his clothes, and by the air, half French and half English, which in so short a time had given him a peculiar distinction.

In due time his marriage with the Baroness Amalia was celebrated, and all the noble relatives were extremely gratified. Then the indispensable journey of the young couple to Rome and Naples, the feasts of the carnival, the box at the theater, the drives in the Corso, and certain very elegant dinners, placed the name of the young and gallant husband among the highest in the society of Milan.

In the circle of fine ladies, and at agreeable dinners with his friends, he himself ventured to mention among his youthful conquests that of the little seamstress, and he knew how to color the story in such a fashion that many ancient dames were scandalized, while others smiled with modest deprecation, and his gay companions all clapped their hands. Count Achilles, leaning gracefully over the arm of the sofa on which sat the wife of his friend, whispered in her ear:

"Ah, Signora! you should take your revenge, and very soon, for all those gallant treacheries of your adventurous husband; you should give him a lesson—trust yourself to me!"

The little wife blushed, and, not daring to look up at her admirer, pressed the gilded sticks of her fan to her lips.

CHAPTER XVII

COMFORT AND CHEER

MEANWHILE, there was suffering in our poor family. After the good and too-confiding Teresa had begun to tremble, to understand what wicked people were like, and to open her eyes upon the perils that surrounded her innocent children, she took to suspecting everybody and everything. In a short time the story of what had happened, carried by curious young women, travestied by the malice or the falsehood of others, accepted in an exaggerated form even by the good, who are often too expectant of evil, caused the eyes of many to be fixed upon the two women, and raised against them a cloud of suspicion. Those who talked and repeated the talk increased the scandal; there were many who fastened upon mother and daughter names that cannot here be repeated, and there were not wanting at last young men who climbed up their dark steps and knocked furiously at the door which bore the modest sign "Seamstress and Embroiderer."

From that day Stella was never seen so joyous and contented as she had been. A cloud of melancholy began to darken the serenity of her brow, and for the first time, the consciousness of poverty and of dishonor disturbed the faith in which until then she had lived without fear, without hating anybody upon earth.

Damiano, wounded in his most sensitive feelings, meditated revenge. He understood that unless he took the law into his own hands he never could accomplish this. For indeed the world-comedy is an old one, in which titled and gilded vice cries louder than virtue in mean clothes and without a name. Besides, proud as he was of the honor of his father, Damiano rebelled at having

his sister's name dragged into so unpleasant an affair, and he saw the necessity of throwing a veil over what had happened.

But, after making this resolution, he returned to his first thought. Feeling more deeply the insult he had suffered, he fancied that the only way to revenge was to make the young gentleman face him in a duel. Even though he knew that he would expose himself to almost certain death, for several days he took pleasure in the thought. He would have been indifferent, he would even have been glad to lay down his life, which now more than ever seemed to him difficult to bear. He said nothing to his mother. He pondered over methods that would force the titled would-be seducer to fight with him.

But after a night of sleepless torment, in thinking of his mother, of Stella, of Celso, he felt that he had not the courage to die. When morning came he went in search of his brother. By good luck he found him alone. From Damiano's confused and excited language the young cleric, who already knew of the incident, could read his project in his eyes, and he said so many things, and talked so affectionately, that Damiano, throwing himself upon his neck, penitent as over a crime actually committed, promised that, as his brother had advised, he would leave the punishment of the wicked to God.

Notwithstanding this, the next day he returned to the same thought. Tormented with this uncertainty, he determined to consult Signor Lorenzo, as his only protector, persuaded that the old soldier, unused as he was to making light of anything, would help him with his own experience. And in truth, when he had heard the story, that veteran of the Imperial Guard let sundry terrible oaths escape from his lips which he had never before hurled against anybody except Cossacks, and he swore that he would arrange the matter himself as it ought to be arranged. But thinking further on the mat-

ter, he began to doubt, and then saw that even if the noble scoundrel should condescend to fight, Damiano might get the worst of the game. He decided that he ought to take the place of a father to the boy, and in a decided tone he concluded that, for the time being, this proposition must be renounced. With a mysterious gesture he added, "Trust to what I tell you: the time will come when you can give tit for tat, not only to this wicked aristocrat, but to many others of his stamp."

What put an end to his doubts was the knowledge he gained, almost immediately after, that the cavaliere had deemed it prudent to seek a change of air for a little while. Then, a few months later, after the marriage of which we have spoken had taken place, Damiano felt his waning anger succeeded by compassion and contempt, so that if at first a desire had raged within him to see his enemy humiliated as he deserved, now he felt that he could almost forgive him.

So, once more at peace with himself, the wish to fulfil his duty to the best of his ability, at this moment of his greatest need, was reawakened in him more ardently than ever. And as he had now finished the course at the lyceum, and was almost twenty years old, he set himself to thinking about the course of life that he must select.

The good shopkeeper, whose books he had continued to keep for nearly two years, offered to take him into the factory in the capacity of clerk, doubling his monthly salary and holding out hopes of a further increase in the future.

But Damiano felt that he could not adjust himself to a life so different from that dreamy and ideal life he had led for so long, and he refused. Teresa and Stella, on their side, advised him to try to enter an office, thinking that in a few months, with his talents and willingness to work, he too might receive a good salary, as did so many others. And Damiano, recognizing the meager prospects of the future and that he would be unable to

pursue the higher studies, had almost decided to accept this advice, when the old painter Costanzo appeared in the field to spoil this plan.

He could not bear that the lad should thus throw away the holiest gift of heaven, the inspiration of beauty. One morning when Damiano was discussing his future with him, the painter poured out all the arguments he could think of to dissuade him. He pointed out the difficulties, the thorns in the pathway on which he would set his feet. He showed that it would be impossible for him to obtain, under three or four years, even the most miserable steady wages. Meanwhile, he was at the conscription age, and only a miracle would enable him to escape the army. That miracle, however, might be performed if he would give ear to his old friend. Here he explained himself more fully, saying that the picture on which Damiano had been working for some months in the winter would soon be finished and ready for the exhibition; that without doubt it would be the best in the collection, and that its young creator, with the honor of the crown, would receive the legal privilege of exemption from military service.

These reasonings disturbed Damiano's thoughts not a little. In the end, the idea of the conscription, which might any day snatch him from his family—this thorn which for some time he had borne in his heart, though he had not dared to speak of it to his mother—was the thing that conquered. A timid but eager hope, which until then he had confessed to no one, hardly even to himself, and which might decide the destiny of his whole life, was rekindled that day, and already in his heart he acknowledged that Costanzo was right. It was the hope of succeeding, that which gives life to all great and good things. Nevertheless, he still hesitated.

"Listen, my friend," said the painter, with a voice so shaken that it showed the truth of what he felt. "Listen; you are young and are the master of your own life.

The Lord has given you what he gives to few, the fire of the soul—beware that you do not allow that fire to go out! Love painting, love it as I do, that sublime art! But have courage; conquer men and the time, and you will win all the more of that which I never knew—a reputation. I, you see, am a poor unfortunate; I was afraid before the height I had to climb, and I took a seat at the bottom. Now that I am old, I have lost everything, and I can only bewail the past as old people do.”

“Noble and honest soul!” thought the lad, while the old man, speaking thus, wrung his hand with affection.

“But you,” continued Costanzo, “have a serene soul and an ardent will. You should raise yourself as you can above these people who surround you and would suffocate you with the fear of want, with the tyranny of the impossible, two things which kill all that is generous and true. Suffer for a little longer, and you will see the day, I promise it, when the multitude will be obliged to admire you, and repeat your name with reverence, and say, ‘Do you see that young man? He is a great painter, and the pupil of the old Costanzo.’ Oh, that I may hear them say this!”

“Listen, friend,” interrupted Damiano, “who will give me time and freedom to study? Who will think in the mean while of my mother?”

“Hearken to me, my son,” resumed the old man, “and do that which I tell you. Put together fifty *scudi* or so. I will look after your mother and your sister, what little I can, and, after all, Providence is not watching over us for nothing. Do this, therefore; say nothing to the ignorant, who always laugh at the poor man that fights and hopes. Walk with God; go as far as Rome, and demand your future from Raphael, from Michelangelo, from Guido, from a few others, their brethren. If you can weep before those miracles of men, if your heart beats stronger and your hand does not tremble,

still follow the way. It may be long and difficult, but it is certain. And when your honest heart tells you that you are worthy of the suffrages of good men, and of the praise of those who know, then return from your pilgrimage, and console your mother and rejoice your friend Costanzo. Oh, yes! I hope to be here still, when your name is mentioned among those who will not allow the honor of our poor Italy to die out."

Thus ardently spoke the old master, and in truth he never had talked to Damiano so persuasively nor with so much simplicity and warmth of affection. Nor had Damiano ever imagined that a man absorbed in his trade, condemned to a lifelong struggle with poverty, should still feel so loftily about that art which had not been liberal of its gifts to him. But perhaps on that very account he took the more comfort and courage.

It was this conversation that changed Damiano's plans. Next day he returned to his half-finished picture, which had remained for a while dusty and abandoned in a corner of the studio. He went back to his picture, and he promised his friend that he would not cease working at it until it was finished. The period for the exhibition was near at hand; he had only a month's time.

Forgetting all his enmities, and suppressing the discontent which until then had poisoned his thoughts, he set energetically to work. For a whole month he spent the entire day upon it. And that solitary life wholly occupied, wholly absorbed in a single idea, in a single hope, became for him a consolation, a need of the soul.

Thus the month passed away, and Damiano finished his painting. But then, as often happens to the human body after long fatigue, he fell back almost immediately into a strange lassitude, into a melancholy deeper than before. All he had done seemed hopelessly bad, and if one day he wished to begin all over again, the next he was tempted to destroy the first creation of his mind

and pencil. He would declare that the picture was not his, that the figures were quite different from those which for so long had inhabited his brain. On the other hand, Costanzo went into ecstasies before the canvas; and while his young friend itched to cut it to pieces with his knife, he foresaw in it the masterpiece of the exhibition.

Meanwhile Stella remained at home beside her mother. At the coming of the springtime she grew melancholy; she had forgotten the gay and simple songs of the past. She embroidered, she sewed, for herself and for her mother. The latter also crucified herself more than ever, seeing less work coming in, and this was a secret revenge of the old huckster, who, having failed to entangle the young seamstress in her net, did her best to undo what little she had done for the two women under the mask of friendliness.

From the window where Stella was sitting, a long stretch of the street could be seen and a large part of the Piazza Fontana. When the girl, dropping her embroidery for a while, seated herself on the balcony to distract her attention by watching the people below, her eyes fell almost involuntarily upon the house situated at the corner of the Piazza. It was the house of that rich and miserly apothecary, her cousin, who ever since she had visited him with her mother, had refused to acknowledge them, although they were his only living relatives. Gazing on this house, the thought occurred to her that it was better to suffer in an honest life than to wallow in the gold that petrifies the heart, since the man who might have helped them remembered them no more than if they were not in the world; and she persuaded herself that one must be poor to sympathize sincerely with the poor.

Plunged in these thoughts, Stella's eyes next fell upon a man who stood all day long in the large doorway of the warehouse of the shop, pounding and mixing barks

and spices in the huge mortar, or patiently turning the coffee-roaster on the furnace. This man, whom the wags of the neighborhood hailed by the nickname of Pestapepe ("pepper-grinder") had more than once rendered some little service to our heroine, running errands for her to this or that shop, fetching packages to her house, or an armful of kindling-wood or what not. He never failed to salute her or Damiano, when they passed by. So both of them felt kindly toward him, responded cordially to his salute, and held him as a friend. They called him the good Rocco, while all the others in the quarter called him "Crazy Rocco" or even "the madman of Piazza Fontana."

CHAPTER XVIII

A BIT OF FLOTSAM

ROCCO was one of those adventurers often found among the lower classes, who pass unknown through the world without home, without friends, without an inheritance of affections. Life for them is a chain of days consumed by weariness and poverty, yet they remain resigned and serene as if misfortune were natural to them.

Rocco himself had known neither father nor mother, He could barely remember the time when, still a child in the hut of a peasant, he had begun to cry through fear of the ill-tempered woman who beat him and cursed him and then left him to lie all day long in the dirt amid the chickens which scratched around him and under the sole care of a watchdog. But he could not remember that anybody ever had kissed him as he had seen other children kissed, that his voice ever had summoned the woman whom he called "mamma." For years stale bread alone had fallen to his share, and the remains of the

clothes cast away by his foster-brothers. When he was barely six years old a switch and a single slice of musty bread would be placed in his hands and he would be sent out to spend the day in the wide meadows or along lonely rivers in company with geese and pigs. Woe to him if he returned home before the sun had disappeared behind the belfry of the country church! The only delight, the only consolation that remained to him in those times was the memory of that church, to which he would run on Sunday mornings with other boys of his own age. How beautiful was that altar, that venerated and tranquil spot illumined by the light of the wax candles, which appeared to him like so many stars! How attentively he followed the mystic functions which as yet had no meaning for him! How he hung upon the unintelligible words of the curate when he appeared in the pulpit adorned with a golden stole!

Thus his childhood had passed. But he was alone and lost in a family not his own, which had hesitated before undertaking this charge for the scanty alms of a charitable institution. They believed him to be an idiot; and indeed he was as wild as the weeds of the desert. Until he was five years old he hardly knew how to stammer a word. His eye was dull and fixed; the native awkwardness of his motions, and his habitual ungainly posture would have shown anyone that had stopped to look at him the meager light of his intelligence. He evinced neither pleasure nor pain; he loved nothing except the sun rising behind the long line of willows. Then he would laugh and leap, giving a cry of joy which sounded like a groan and clapping his hands together. His only friend was the house-dog, which often followed him and crouched beside him on the green shore to warm itself in the sun. When he had reached his fourteenth year he did not know how to read. No one had thought of putting a primer into his hands or sending him with other children to the public school, and no

one had deemed it worth while to teach him to repeat the name of God. Every time that he entered the church he knelt down because he saw the others do so, and wept unobserved, wept without knowing the reason why.

It was at this age that his mind, clouded until then, experienced for the first time a strong upheaval. Strange and new emotions arose within him, and overflowed his heart. Then he understood, through some inner instinct, the misery of his condition, and, casting a wondering look around at the beautiful things and at the men who seemed to him so cheerful and so happy and comparing them with himself, he felt in his soul his first sorrow, a sorrow like unto death. He felt a necessity of loving, of confiding in another what he suffered!

That day, he burst into tears for the first time. Thereafter, possibly because he was possessed with the idea of finding his mother in the ample bosom of nature whereon he had always lived, it seemed to him that every breath of air and every mildest breeze were a melodious voice that called him by name, and he would say that it was the voice of his mother. And rising from the ground, he would go thither, where the wind breathed, straight toward that voice, and lose himself in the forest, feeling his heart trembling with joy at every motion of the leaves, and walking day and night with no feeling of fatigue, with no desire for repose.

In this melancholy madness the poor child of the air, no longer watched over by those who had undertaken to care for him, at last wandered far away from the countryside where he had spent his early years of bitterness. Picked up one day, half alive, by two wagoners on the highway, he was consigned to the office of the nearest commune, where nobody knew him, and the political deputy of the place, having been able to extract nothing from him except his name of Rocco, sent him to the commissioner. The latter, who was skilled in such tricks, took very little trouble over the affair but simply declared

him, from the first, an imbecile and a vagabond, and had him taken to the royal prefecture. Through all the journey, the unfortunate lad gave no sign of insanity, but allowed himself to be dragged whither and how they pleased. Not a single complaint issued from his lips. And thence they transported him into the city, on a cart, with an escort of two rural constables. Thrown into a cell to pass the night with a dozen malefactors who welcomed him with vile words and sneering laughter, the poor innocent lad felt his soul suffocate in the fetid air of jail, and suddenly broke out into furious transports, and horrible cries. He swooned for a long time, miserably shaken by shivers and convulsions which awoke pity and terror. He was speedily taken to a charitable hospital, where he remained for months, hanging between life and death, without a single lucid interval.

Finally, when it pleased God, he recovered. It seemed that, little by little, with the restoration of life all memory of the past had died out of him. The doctors of the hospital and the attendants had shown him some little kindness, and he knew how to find words of gratitude and tears of tenderness. He was always obedient and respectful. He spoke little, and was content with everything. As his physical strength had increased to an extraordinary degree, he was eager to perform alone all the hardest work of the hospital. But with all his strength of body, the light of reason grew weaker in him, so that one might have said that every natural sentiment was extinguished in his heart. After several months had passed, one of the officials of the hospital, deeming that he had fully recovered, put a few lire in his hand, with a certificate of poverty, and dismissed him with a blessing. Recommended by a good priest, he had at first found a place with a dealer in wood. But as he did not know how to read or write he lost this employment, and passed two or three years in the shop of a knife-grinder, turning the wheel for ten hours a day. Even

at this hard task, he would lighten his slavery by singing *ritornelli* and snatches of strange rustic songs which he had heard or possibly invented. At last he passed from this shop to the warehouse of the apothecary shop on the Piazza Fontana, where we now find him. For three years he had been there, the last in the family of that rich and miserly merchant.

Everybody, therefore, called him "the madman of the Piazza Fontana," although he was certainly no more mad than those who gave him that name. But as in the innocence of his thoughts and in the simplicity with which he looked at things he managed to tell enlightening truths about certain people, and made sundry bizarre observations, rarely quite understood but none the less significant, the women of the neighborhood, and the few who took notice of him, used to say that his upper story was unfinished, or in more vernacular phrase that he was touched *in nomine patris*.

Rocco, at the entrance to the old warehouse, his head covered with an oilcloth cap, the sleeves of his shirt rolled back, grinding with a pestle in the sonorous mortar, was the living type of that boyish figure which may be seen painted on the side of every chemist's shop or every chocolate factory, by some Michelangelo of the slums. There was no one among the customers of the store that did not greet Rocco, in passing, with a jesting word. And he, although these things hurt him, answered each according to his folly in some proverbial phrase:

"Good day, madman, what news?"

"Old news: the good man perspires, misery and poverty are sisters, feather by feather the goose is plucked."

"Eh, what do you mean?"

"Nothing; poor devils alone can touch one another's hands."

"Give me, Rocco, the numbers of the lottery; mad people can guess them."

"Play your age, the day you were born, and the first number that comes into your head as a winner."

"Madman, I salute you!"

"I salute you, wise man who drives other people mad."

But Rocco, for some time past, had changed his habits. When anyone spoke to him he no longer answered with the former slangy simplicity. Shaking his head, he would barely smile. From indifference and suspicion he sank into a resignation similar to that of his childhood. He never passed in front of a church, he never heard the sound of a bell, without making the sign of the cross, and if formerly he had rarely paused for a minute from his toil, now, on the contrary, he would often leave his work, throw himself upon a bench, bend his head upon his hands, and without being aware of it, his eyes would be full of tears. His master, who until then had looked upon him as a beast of burden, threatened one day to discharge him, but the poor wretch showed himself so repentant, so terrified at the mere idea of once again finding himself alone in the world, that the apothecary was fain to promise he would leave him undisturbed at his mortar.

This singular change had come upon him ever since his two young neighbors, the pretty seamstress and her brother, who passed by him every day, had begun to respond to his salute, to exchange a word with him, in that sincerity which teaches us to love our brethren in misfortune. Damiano, meeting him one morning in another quarter of the town, had stopped to speak to him, and returning in his company asked him questions about his past. He was the first in many years who had ever taken notice of Rocco's sad plight, who had interested himself in the story of his life, which he had almost begun to forget. At last he could lose himself in the heart of another, unburden himself, without fear of a sneer from his listener, of many things that had

weighed upon him all his life. From that day Damiano became more than a friend, more than a benefactor. From that day the first thought of the former madman was for his two guardian angels, so he called Damiano and Stella. He would have gone through fire for them, he would have surrendered life and liberty for them. His joy was to gaze from afar upon the girl, as upon an apparition, when at break of day she appeared at the window, or when, weary of work, she bent over the windowsill, and opening the cage called the canary to hop upon her fingers.

One day the bird peeped out from the half-open door of its cage, and hopping here and there upon the windowsill, suddenly took a long flight to the top of a tower that capped the house in front of them. No sooner was the girl aware of this than she uttered a cry, and running in dismay to the window, called to her canary, imitating its chirp, and waving her handkerchief. As the fugitive did not respond, but instead flew still higher, she began to weep. She thought she had lost her little friend forever, when out of a small dormer window in the roof of that tower, first a head and then two arms appeared which grasped beams and joists and lifted the entire body into view. It was Rocco.

A mortal chill seized her, thinking on the danger the youth ran for her sake. With her eyes full of tears and her heart beating, she breathlessly watched his every motion. From second to second it seemed to her that he must be dashed from that height into the street. But Rocco, with catlike agility, climbed along the slanting sides of the roof, and clutching now and then at the chimney-pots stealthily followed the bird as it flitted from one ridge to another. As soon as he was close to it, he risked a leap which called forth a cry of horror from all the women intently watching him from the neighboring balconies, and caught the little rebel. He hid it in his breast, between the folds of his shirt, and

then shot a glance at Stella's window as he prepared to descend.

It is impossible to describe the young girl's joy when Rocco placed the canary in her hands. He did not know what to say; he acted as if had done the most natural thing in the world, but Stella, who a moment before had been overwhelmed by the danger he ran, reproved him amid her ingenuous thanks for having taken so great a risk for so small a matter. He smiled, but still knew not what to say.

After this episode, the friendship between the two became closer than ever. The widow and her daughter made use of Rocco's services on all occasions, in every emergency, and he was always happy if he could do anything for them, and returned to his work with unspeakable joy. From time to time, even when he was not summoned, he plucked up courage to call upon them, and on Sundays, in the free hour after dinner when he knew that Damiano would be at home, he never failed to seek his friend's society. Stella would expect him, and sometimes chid him a little if he were late, for she had undertaken to teach him how to read. The poor lad felt as if he had touched heaven with his finger, when he found that it was possible for him to exchange a few irrelevant words with her as he studied in the prayer-book of his young teacher.

CHAPTER XIX

ERMINIA AND TANCREDO

AT the beginning of August the halls of the Palace of Brera were opened to the public. Among the many pictures sent in competition was one which more than any other attracted the eyes of connoisseurs in art, and those that had

the difficult duty of judging the works on exhibition and awarding the honor of the crown.

This picture was not indeed a masterpiece; on the contrary, the critics had noticed many serious defects. One thought that the composition was a little crude, another that the grouping of the figures was not very academical, and a third that the gradations of tones and colors were badly managed and gave evidence that the work was by a youthful student. But, on the other hand, and almost counterbalancing such technical defects, the best critics discovered in this picture, which at first sight did not seem to be anything wonderful, the genuine art-sentiment, still virginal, but free and graceful. There was no exaggeration, nothing conventional in the lines or in the colors, nor affected in the gestures, but, instead, there were natural poses, a drawing elegant as well as frank, a harmony and purity of coloring and, above all, what could only be the gift of inspiration—an original idea and a singular truth in the sad expression upon the beautiful faces of the wounded knight and the loving lady.

This painting was the first work of our Damiano. Among all who saw it those who deemed it worthy of the crown were only the fit and few. They discovered in it the expression of a genius not made rigid by precept but retempered by a natural feeling for beauty. The greater number, however, and among them those who make a mere business of art—battening on the little academical glories, on gazette-made reputations—saw nothing rare or beautiful in this much praised picture. Perhaps because it was praised by good critics they made a special effort to find it bad.

Of the other works sent to the Exhibition, each according to custom bearing a different motto, the artists were known or guessed at; but no one had yet succeeded in guessing who had sent in the last picture, which until then, especially in the opinions of young

people, seemed to exceed the merits of the others. Costanzo, although he could hardly contain himself for joy, believing in the certain triumph of his pupil, did not fail in his praise, although he was careful not to breathe the young painter's secret to anyone. And as Damiano had always kept his canvas hidden, and when he had finished it had said no word to anybody, neither his mother nor his sister could possibly imagine that in those very days, thoughtful, distracted, and indifferent as he seemed, he was awaiting a judgment that would decide his entire future.

A few days before the Exhibition was to be opened, Damiano, by means of a pass obtained through the painter Costanzo, was enabled to take his family to the Brera Palace. The women, although they knew that he had begun to work at painting in the studio of Signor Costanzo, never imagined that morning that they were going to see a real picture from Damiano's brush, a picture which he himself a fortnight earlier had loaded on Rocco's shoulders, that it might be sent in secret to the Exhibition. Fain would Signor Costanzo have run ahead of the messenger to proclaim the truth in a loud voice, but Damiano made him promise not to move a step, and the honest soul obeyed.

No sooner had the family entered the hall where the competing pictures were disposed here and there on their easels than Stella gave a cry of joy. In the first picture she saw she discovered her own portrait in the face of the beautiful damsel there depicted. Then she understood her brother's secret, and running with impetuous frankness into his arms, she exclaimed:

"Oh, Damiano! why have you not before this shared your thoughts with those who love you so well?"

"My dear, good sister," answered the lad, pressing her to his heart, "say nothing, for pity's sake! You wish me well, and it all seems to you very beautiful, but you do not know that the beautiful in art is the fire that

kills him who steals it, as the ancients believed. I have done nothing yet, and within me I freeze and tremble."

Teresa now approached the picture. She asked first one question and then another, now of Signor Costanzo, who did not dare to tell her all he thought, and now of her Celso, who for the first time in many months had left the solitude of his study to spend that day with his mother. The good family gathered around the picture. Moved by a single impulse, they felt in that moment an ineffable and holy joy, which shone in the face of each. It was in fact a pretty scene, and so genuine that it would have moved any heart.

"Explain it all to me, Damiano," said the mother, turning to him a joyful face and with tears in her eyes. "Was it really you who painted this picture—so big, so beautiful? And how could you, dear child, have labored so hard in so short a time, when you had to study at the school and to work for all of us?"

"Oh, mamma," he replied, "it was my recreation, my consolation."

"I understand now," continued Teresa, "the mystery of what kept you away from us for hours and hours. And I imagined all sorts of reasons, all sorts of possibilities, may God pardon me!"

"Mother mine," answered Damiano, "poverty and love teach us many things. I confess it, I thought more of you than of myself, and thought I saw the day coming when perhaps I might be able to arrange for you a life less toilsome, less anxious, and for myself—So I was forced to try; a fire burned within me. But after all, perhaps it was only a dream, and I was hoping for the impossible!"

"Oh! you are always the same!" said Stella sadly.

"Don't talk such nonsense," said Signor Costanzo, assuming a loud and severe voice, "you anger me! Modesty is a beautiful thing, but when it is as clear as that two and two make four that you are a born painter—I

know, indeed, that that is always the way, talent withdraws into obscurity, and dwarfs imagine they are giants. But now there is only one thing to be said—you ought to win over the heads of all the others. I have a pair of eyes, and if necessary they will hear from me.”

“Oh, you wish me well, perhaps too well!”

“Yes, but the good I wish you doesn’t blind my eyes, and I can declare to you positively that your Erminia alone is worth all the rest of the pictures put together.”

“Look, mamma, how beautiful, how expressive is the face of the dying knight, who seems hardly conscious of self. That is Tancred, is it not, Damiano?”

So spoke Stella, leaning on the arm of her brother, lovingly lifting her little hand toward the picture. “I remember the story well. I remember his love for the beautiful Erminia, which you read to me one day in Tasso.”

“Damiano!” said Celso, “God has given you a great gift and you have known how to turn it to account. It is impossible that your merit, though now unknown, should not be recognized and rewarded when it is known. Yes, you will do honor to your family, to the name of your father, and we shall be fortunate to belong to you.”

“Oh, my dear ones,” cried the lad, “may God protect you! But don’t speak to me in this way,” and he assumed a severe aspect. “I know that the kind wishes of those you love are worth more than public praise, which can often be bought and sold cheap. To see this joy on your faces, and these tears of my mother and my sister, is for me a greater reward than I ever had hoped for. But suppose you are all mistaken? Suppose your good will makes you see on my brow what the Lord has not put there, a light that He gives to very few upon this earth? Then farewell to the dreams of youth, farewell to the fancies of the past, farewell to the years thrown away for nothing! However I may force myself, I never can reach the height where the

heart breathes freely! Instead I shall find myself at the beginning of the way without time or energy to do that which I ought to have done at first, that which all the others do."

"See how you will misjudge yourself, my poor brother," said Stella, lovingly; "those are the thoughts which made you sad and silent, and instead of looking at the bright side"—

"Yes," added the mother, "instead of hoping, you try to snatch from me the contentment and consolation you have given me. But no! it is impossible that one who has the heart and the thoughts that you have should not succeed in everything he attempts. And meanwhile I thank God that he has given me such a son as Damiano!"

At these words, the lad raised his head with renewed cheerfulness, and his melancholy face seemed irradiated with that interior glow which comes from a pure and contented mind. He approached his mother, took her hand reverently in his and kissed it.

CHAPTER XX

AN UNKNOWN FRIEND

AN unobserved witness of this scene, a plainly dressed man of simple appearance, whose hair was streaked with gray, had unintentionally overheard the conversation and seen the youth kiss his mother's hand. Coming forward, he turned to the young artist:

"Is it you," he asked, "that painted this picture?"

The action and the kindly sound of his voice, but, still more, the light in his eyes proclaimed in this newcomer a broadminded yet modest man—one that knows and feels, the man of genius, who always seeks the evidences

of beauty, who discovers it everywhere, delights in it, and holds himself happy to have lived one day more. They never had seen him before, but Damiano felt his heart beating fiercely when he raised his head and met the glance of the unknown.

The lad remained a moment overwhelmed. Then vanquished by the imperiousness of that glance, which remained fixed upon him:

"Yes," he answered calmly, "this is my first picture."

"You were born a painter, young man," returned the unknown. "Give me your hand. I do not know who you are, but I overheard your talk, and I am your friend."

An inexpressible joy shone in the eyes of Damiano as he extended his hand. The other shook it and said:

"No, it is not true that our art is dead, as declare that selfish generation which is only too ready to deny country, religion, family and all! We Italians are still something, by heaven! Unless we are condemned by ourselves to die forever, the fire of our ancestors is not altogether extinguished; but art, that fatherland of the imagination which seeks for beauty, has need of children who will make sacrifices for her. Young man, fear nothing! hearken to the voice which calls you, it accompanies an inspiration from heaven. But beware of those evil ones who, jealous of the good consciences of others and possessing imbecile minds, will attempt to suffocate the divine spark in your heart. Live obscurely and humbly, study earnestly, do not weary of thinking, do not seek applause, and never sneer at the ancient faith in art, either alone or in the company of others. Yes! the path you are beginning to tread is longer and more sorrowful than you think, but if you walk slowly for a time, if you do not thirst too soon for fame, if you lust not for gold, you may arrive where it is given to few to arrive. Suffer, be poor and strong, and one day perhaps you will be great."

At these kind and solemn words, the joy that had irradiated Damiano's face disappeared. The two women, the cleric, and with them Costanzo, had respectfully drawn to one side, so that the two artists remained alone before the picture. Then the unknown, quietly approaching the canvas, in a low, serene voice explained certain details to the lad, and made him see the defects which his keen eyes had discovered. There were not many, most of them were excusable and easy to correct, and were indeed such as revealed a vivid and ardent mind which had sought help only in itself. Damiano quickly recognized here and there the errors which hitherto he had been unable to discover, and these were precisely what had made him unconsciously so discontented with his work. Thereupon the unknown fell to praising the simplicity of the conception, the force of the drawing, a certain natural purity of form, a harmony of colors, a right temperance in tints and correct gradations of light, and above all, the truth and the emotion emanating from the two fine figures of Erminia and Tancred, in which could be seen a depth of expression that one might seek in vain among the other canvases.

"You see, my friend," he concluded, "that I am sincere with you. Those two heads suffice to reveal to me what one day your brush may accomplish—or rather, your soul. These beloved figures you have seen in fancy, have seen and divined in your own heart. They are two types—as we say—that no master could possibly have taught you to depict, save the greatest of masters, he who lives within you—Love. But I do not know whether others will see and judge as I do. Many good points, and points highly esteemed in the studio and the school, are evident in the other pictures which surround us, but—I repeat it—none has that quality which I see in yours. If the decision lay with me, I think that you would have the crown; but if abject servility to precept and pedantry should assert itself, if injustice should

flourish, or intrigue, which ever spoils what is best, do not lose heart, young man. On the contrary, all these things are of good augury for the painful artist life you have begun, because genius can only be had at the expense of sorrow."

"Thank you, Signor, I will bear your words written in my heart," Damiano answered. "It is even too great a reward for me—the praise I have heard from you to-day. I never shall forget that I have been able to press this hand as the hand of a friend."

Signor Costanzo now approached our hero and told him in a whisper the name of the man with whom he had been talking, which he had learned from one of the attendants. Damiano blushed, and the words that had begun to issue from his heart suddenly failed him, but he had the courage to accost the gentleman anew to say:

"This day will be one of the most beautiful of all my life."

They left. Damiano, parting from his family, found his soul filled with joyous thoughts. To himself he said: "He is the true artist; he is great and good."

While Damiano was thus preparing himself for the journey of life and for the difficult trials that accompany it, misfortune, which too early had begun to dog his steps, still kept an eye on him from afar. He whom fate had once before thrown in his way, that Signor Omobono whom he both feared and hated, was maturing in secret a plan to draw into his own grasp the fate of the poor family. The genius of evil seemed to have inspired him. Suffice it to say that at that very time, without allowing himself to be seen, he knew everything that was happening in their house.

Our friends, meanwhile, had perhaps forgotten him, for good people almost always believe too little in evil, but he well knew what it was he still wished for.

A few days passed and Damiano, dwelling on the uncertain issue of the competition, knew not how to apply

himself to anything. He had not a moment's peace. At the same time, from I know not what scruple of pride, perhaps even from the fear of changing the doubt that consumed him into a sad certainty, he would speak to no one on the matter. He did not even wish to know the day when his fate would be decided, and he forced himself not to think about it. But Costanzo could not remain in suspense. Had it not been that he was stricken down by a fever he never would have rested until he had learned from some source that the crown had been given to Damiano's picture.

One morning, however, Damiano, leaving the painter's house, went almost involuntarily toward the Brera Palace. The unusual number of people walking in that direction sent a shiver through him. He pressed on toward the severe and ancient palace from which he had last emerged full of such high and joyous hope. As he entered the large courtyard, it appeared to him that all eyes were fastened upon him. He trembled. Perhaps his soul already divined the truth. He ascended with the others and crossed the first and second halls, already full of young students and of curious or indifferent people. He had hardly put his foot in the next room when he saw, facing him on the wall to the right, a picture, on the top of which was placed the laurel crown. But that picture was not his!

He knew no more, he saw nothing more. His vision was clouded. A sharp pain darted through his heart. He would have fallen to the floor had he not been able to lean against the pedestal of a colossal one-armed statue near which he accidentally found himself. No one knew how he was suffering; on the contrary, a well-meaning stranger who wished to see and know everything accosted him and, pointing out the crowned picture, ingenuously asked:

"Can you tell me what that picture represents and why it has that crown?"

The youth recovered himself at this voice and raised his head, but he could not help casting a glance upon his own poor picture, consigned to a corner under a scanty light. Then, with all possible calm, he fully satisfied the stranger, explaining to him the story of the picture and telling him that the picture with the crown had been adjudged the best among the many placed in competition. He left the palace, but he had not courage to return home at once to face his mother and sister. Retracing his steps as far as the house of the painter Constanzo, he once more took up his post by his bedside, and without saying a word, smothering his sighs in the pillow, he inclined his head upon his hands and longed to weep, but could not.

CHAPTER XXI

STRANGE VISITORS

SIGNOR Omobono, who for many months had held himself in hiding, repaired one day to Teresa's house. It was precisely at the time when Damiano, after his ill-success at the Exhibition, had lost courage and hope. He who works underhandedly knows well the opportune time for an evil deed. Signor Omobono wove a tissue of lies for the two women. He began by informing them that matters of great moment had detained him all that time out of Milan. But he was not accustomed to forget his friends. He informed himself minutely of the affairs of the family, showing great solicitude and marveling greatly at things he understood a great deal better than they. Thus in a few days he was able to recover his friendly footing. Teresa had placed herself in his hands. Stella, also, though at the bottom of her heart she retained a vague remnant of antipathy, decided that she had been

unjust to him, even though she did not trust him implicitly.

As before, Omobono took care not to arrive at Teresa's house until an hour when he believed that he would not be disturbed by the presence of Damiano or Lorenzo. At that time Damiano, not knowing what to do with his life, wandered around from morning till night outside the walls of the city, far from everybody, full of sad thoughts; while Signor Lorenzo, himself also preoccupied with the boy's melancholy, followed the youth in order to remonstrate with him and restore him, as he said, to reason.

Teresa, therefore, had ample opportunity to gossip with Signor Omobono about her new misfortunes. Meanwhile, she did not know that a still greater misfortune was at hand; she did not know that her Damiano, whose name was comprised in the conscription list of that year, might be torn from her any day. She did not think of it, or possibly she believed that Damiano, the sole support of a widowed mother, must be exempt from conscription, and she certainly would not have been able to understand that the law required she should have no other means of support and that her other children be under fifteen years of age if Damiano were to enjoy exemption from military service.

Nor did Damiano ever speak to her of what might happen. Apparently, he never even thought of it. He no longer sought counsel with Signor Costanzo, Signor Lorenzo, nor with the good Rocco. Perhaps the latter was the only one who could have guessed all the agony he concealed in his heart, the only one who, as he passed along the streets, would follow him from afar with his eyes, in which shone pity and love.

But the time arrived when Damiano must perforce prepare his mother for the sorrowful future. He began with sundry vague hints about the uncertainty of things in this world, the necessity of resignation, of sustain-

ing with all one's strength the burden that could not be cast from one's back. She would not understand him. Stella understood, however; only too well did she perceive the drift of Damiano's broken and bitter words. Still, she had the courage not to weep, and without saying anything to her brother, she strove, little by little, to accustom her mother to the thought that Damiano might some day be obliged to leave her.

Amid this clash of domestic affections and afflictions, Signor Omobono assiduously continued his visits. One might have imagined that the infernal projects he had cherished against Damiano and his family had by some miracle been abandoned, such was the amiability and the kindness which he exhibited toward the two women, such the spell which the innocent beauty of Stella seemed to throw over him.

Damiano's picture, a mute testimony to his sorrowful soul, lay dusty and forgotten in a corner of his room, behind the little table now littered with books, equally dusty and forgotten. Since the day in which the lad had decided that his artistic vocation was merely a bit of crazy conceit, he had said good-by to his brushes, his canvases, his books; he had become indifferent to everything. One morning, Signor Omobono, passing through the room, asked to see the picture. He bore it to the light of the window, and babbling words and phrases of critical cant, said that the picture had its merits, that it was a pity to leave it there, stranded among the cobwebs; that it might be possible to obtain a little good money for it, and that, in short, he himself would seek a purchaser for it.

The mother was greatly consoled. Stella replied that it would be well to speak to Damiano about this possible bit of good fortune. Omobono, however, to serve his own ends, replied that they must take care to say nothing to him, until the matter was really arranged as he intended it should be. The girl thought that the pic-

ture, if it were really as beautiful as it seemed to her, might be made to yield enough to pay for a substitute for Damiano if ever he were selected for conscription. But she kept the thought to herself and did not confide it even to her brother.

A few days later Rocco, who, as was his custom, stood grinding aromatic spices on the threshold of the warehouse, saw a fine carriage stop near the door of the house where Damiano's family dwelt. The incident was a novelty. He stretched his head out of the door, gazed with all his eyes, saw the coach door open and a man descend whom he recognized at once, for he had often met him in his master's house, though he did not know his name. Following him came a gentleman of grave and aristocratic aspect, rather advanced in years, attired in a topcoat lined with fur. This gentleman, also, he recognized as one whom he had frequently seen passing in the streets of the city. The strangers were Signor Omobono and the Illustrissimo.

The poor shopboy felt a tightening of the heart at first sight of that old gentleman. Without knowing the reason why, a buzz of thoughts began in his head and he would have given anything to guess why these gentlemen had come here, and what they were saying to each other, for he saw them laughing and gesticulating. He was sure that they were going to pay Teresa a visit, and he felt anger and even fury and grief. He tried to persuade himself that this was all fancy on his part, but an inner voice suggested to him that there must be some mystery here and that evil was being hatched. He remained motionless, never turning his eyes away from the door and the carriage.

An hour passed before he saw the gentlemen descending the long stairs. The elder remounted into the carriage. His satellite, making a profound obeisance, with his hat in his hand, disappeared into the street. What passed in Rocco's heart during that eternal hour no one

but he ever knew. He wished to run to Teresa, to ask the reason for so extraordinary a visit, but he had not the courage. He wished to tell the story to Damiano, but no sooner did he see him crossing the head of the square than the words seemed to die within him.

The following day, at the same hour, he saw the same carriage stop again in front of the door. The old nobleman was alone, but he had no sooner set foot upon the carriage-step than his companion of the day before, who had been awaiting him at a little distance, pressed respectfully forward, extending an arm to assist his descent. At the sight the boy's blood froze, but he did not stir. As soon as the two had disappeared he ran out of the shop, passed cautiously by the side of the carriage, and reaching the stairs, ascended them behind the backs of the others, without making the slightest noise.

"By Bacchus! these stairs are very long," said the old nobleman to the other, who preceded him.

"Have a little patience, Illustrissimo, and you may be able to shorten them by half," answered his friend with a suggestive chuckle.

"Eh? I don't understand you; what do you mean?"

"I mean that, if things go all right, Illustrissimo, you may be able to perform a miracle—to transport the fourth floor to the second!"

"Rascal and madman! I wonder at you; what are you thinking of? If I have listened to you, if I have come here, if I have returned here, it is only because I wish to see for myself when it is a question of doing good."

"Certainly, certainly! I know your heart, Illustrissimo. If I have again spoken to you of this family, I have done so because I was eager"—

"Oh, you are a fox! I know you, my good man. You have given me to understand that the little one is a pearl"—

"And I maintain it."

"But I have small faith in you. I know that you have been visiting the house for some time, and that's enough."

"Bah! who told you that, Illustrissimo?"

"Who? Rosso."

"Impossible. What does he know about my affairs? And, besides, didn't you see for yourself yesterday, did you not know, did you not persuade yourself"—

And in secret he cursed Rosso, his rival in the favor of the Illustrissimo.

"They are good people, yes, good people, and I am disposed to do something for them. As to the girl"—

Until now Rocco had not lost a syllable of the conversation, but at the turn of the stairs, fearing to be discovered, he halted a moment, but though he strained his ears, he could not hear the rest of the phrase.

In a moment he ventured to renew the ascent, drawn by some unknown force which made him forget all danger. And he turned the corner just in time to hear a part of the dialogue.

"Look you," said the nobleman, halting on a landing, to catch his breath, "if I had known this a year ago, by gratifying the old woman with that little benefice which she came to beg me for, I should have entered into her good graces and at this moment— It's true that the young cleric is still in evidence, as I have heard, and benefices to appease a little priest are not wanting at home"—

"Thanks to your saintly predecessors, Illustrissimo."

"Eh! eh! Well, what has not yet been done can still be done."

"As to the eldest son, it is necessary to hold him down. He has a head, he has singular ideas."

"We will pay him for that daub that I saw yesterday, and then good-night!"

"He will have to be content with that. It may be that this year the conscription will rid us of him."

"Very good. If he has crazy ideas, I know how to cure him. I know something about the pride of these beggars. It looks as if it would threaten the world; but you will see it calm down at the sight of a handful of *scudi*."

Before the pair had arrived at the humble door on the top floor, Rocco slowly and cautiously had reached the top of the staircase, but he dared not make another move. He saw the old nobleman draw himself up with a show of dignity, supporting himself behind the rampart of his white cravat. Throwing over his shoulder the cape of his overcoat, he exposed to view a great display of chains and decorations pendent from the button-holes of the garment; then, puffing solemnly over the lapis-lazuli head of his Indian cane, he entered the poor rooms. Signor Omobono, who had accompanied him to the door, having once more raised his hat and made a low bow, turned back, so that Rocco, to escape being seen, had barely time to crouch in a corner, behind the parapet of the stairs on the same floor.

When he found himself alone, Rocco leaped at once to his feet. On the pallid face and the low brow of him whom all called the poor madman blazed a wrath so fierce and proud, mingled with both contempt and pain, that in that moment he seemed no longer himself. He said not a word, but grinding his teeth, he raised his hand with a malediction toward the door through which the nobleman had entered, gazed up at the sky, and then rapidly descended the stairs.

With his head on fire, and his heart trembling at thought of the danger that his good angel might at that very moment be encountering, Rocco, thanking Heaven for the inspiration it had sent him, now thought seriously of what he ought to do. He could think of no honest reason why the old nobleman had found it necessary to return so soon to this house. The idea that he had been brought thither by Signor Omobono, a man whom

he himself could not meet without feeling his blood stir rebelliously within him—this fixed and overpowering idea terrified him.

He was quite sure that Damiano was in the dark as to what was happening, so he deemed it first of all necessary to find the thread of this plot, or to obstruct, for the moment, at least, on any pretext whatever, this mysterious intrigue.

CHAPTER XXII

ONE OF THE LEGION OF HONOR

SHOULD he run in search of Damiano? No, who knows where or when he would be able to find him? That honest Signor Lorenzo was the man for the occasion, but he hardly knew him; besides, he was a little afraid of him, and would not be able to tell him anything. Rocco reached the street and saw the carriage still waiting. The fat coachman had got down from the box and his body was swaying to and fro in the middle of the sidewalk. Rocco walked up to him, assuming a vacant look.

"Signor Coachman," he said, touching his oilskin cap, and forcing himself to smile.

"What is it?" asked the liveried Jehu, surlily.

"Nothing—here—because, as you see, here"—and he drew from his pocket a piece of paper, looking like a letter, which he himself had folded in great haste.

"What is it?"

"You are, perhaps, one of the household of the old gentleman whom I just met with in there, and who made me a present so that I might take this letter at once to his palace."

"My master? it must have been he," replied the other,

falling into the trap that Rocco had baited for him. "What of it?"

"Well, you see," said Rocco impassively, "I don't know where the palace is."

"What, you don't know the Palazzo Trestelle of my most illustrious patron? Imbecile that you are! Turn that way," and he gave him a box on the ear that made him stagger; "you can't go wrong; then come back and we will empty a single glass to the health of the master."

For Rocco the name of the palace sufficed. Without another word he took to his heels. Now at last he knew who the nobleman was, and, as he slackened his pace to a walk, he strove to hit upon some plan that might frustrate the design he felt sure this man was concocting. He had not gone twenty paces when he found himself face to face with Signor Lorenzo, who, with bowed head and slow step, and talking to himself, seemed to be on his way to the widow's dwelling. Rocco stopped, though he was barely acquainted with the veteran and never had dared to address him. But now he determined to tell him everything and trust to him. Lorenzo had not noticed the boy, so that when Rocco ventured to touch his arm to make him turn round, he shook himself, and said gruffly, "What do you want?"

The good lad gathered together all his courage, and replied that he came in the name of the Signora Teresa, of that lady who had the honor of his acquaintance, and that she prayed him to come to her house that day, on a matter of importance.

"Well, I will go to-morrow," answered Signor Lorenzo, after glancing at Rocco suspiciously.

"Oh, no, no!" Rocco exclaimed; "she expects you to-day, at once."

"Go away! I have something to do. To-day I cannot go."

But as something strange is happening there"—

"What? What do you mean? To-day, no; let that suffice. That foolish woman is half crazy, and I suppose she has some new cobweb in her head."

"No, Signor Lorenzo, listen to me! It is really necessary that you return there with me at once, without losing a minute; it was Heaven that sent you this way."

Poor Rocco said these last words with an accent so piteous and sincere that Victor's old comrade was moved; his fears and suspicions were aroused, and grasping the lad's arm with some violence, he stammered, half in anger and half in fear:

"Tell me, tell me quick! Has any misfortune—is it Stella, the daughter of my Victor? Don't make any mystery about the matter. Speak!"

"I don't know, but it does concern her, yes, it is for that dear angel that I tremble," Rocco answered, full of joy at finding that the old man had understood him even before he had explained matters. And he added: "I will tell you all I know."

Within a quarter of an hour the old soldier, who on the way had learned everything the shopboy could tell, entered the widow's rooms, without asking permission or even taking off his hat. He found himself in the presence of the Illustrissimo. Teresa rose from her chair, all embarrassment, and Stella, who was standing in a corner, covered her face with her hands.

Lorenzo stood in silence for a moment, not because the sight of the haughty nobleman made him doubt as to what he ought to say; but because of an involuntary hesitation at seeing in the buttonhole of the old man's coat the ribbon of that same medal of honor which he also carried, as the last relic of days that never would return. But that slight hesitation passed away; his next thought told him that there was nothing in common between himself and the proud aristocrat; that the latter undoubtedly owed the cross to his money, to his noble birth, while he himself had won it on the field

of battle with his blood. Meanwhile, the Illustrissimo, though greatly surprised by this rude interruption, gave no sign of either displeasure or contempt. Turning half ironically and half compassionately toward Teresa, who for her part looked from one to the other in blank dismay, he said carelessly:

"Tell me, who is that man?"

The veteran reddened at these insolent words and bit his lips. Glad that the other had given him a pretext for speaking, he repeated:

"That man, Signor? That man? Certainly I am not a marquis, or a count, or any other titled personage, but something better. As you say, Signor, I am a man!"

The Illustrissimo did not respond directly to this equally insolent answer, but turning toward the widow he remarked:

"You seem to know some eccentrics, my good woman. Perhaps this is your brother, your cousin, some relative?"

"Oh, Signor, you see," began Teresa in great embarrassment, "he is a friend of ours, an honest man, an old friend of my poor husband. And if you knew him"—

"And why should this gentleman care to know me?" brusquely interrupted Lorenzo. "I am a friend of the house, that's enough. My friend, the father of this girl, and I were closer than brothers. Stella knows me; I am the first person she ever knew. And it seems to me that I have a right to come into your house, haven't I, Signora Teresa?"

"But who denies it?" answered the Illustrissimo, with some impatience, at last turning toward Lorenzo.

"I should like to see the man who would deny me, or see any man that deems he has a right to come in here at his own pleasure, under a mask of friendship or protection, and destroy the virtue that dwells here—the virtue that consoles two beings who I may say belong to me."

The Illustrissimo was not used to such a tone of superiority and rebuke. Although the veteran had spoken as if of some imaginary person, he could not help feeling himself alluded to. This could be discerned in the fiery glance he flashed at the soldier.

At last the leash of his patience snapped.

"And what," cried the offended nobleman, "what do you mean by coming here to annoy me with your imaginings? You are ridiculous, to say the least. If you have any business in the house, you had better postpone it to another time."

"I have business here, as you suggest, and the time to despatch it is now!" Lorenzo answered, in a bold, sonorous voice.

"Oh, I see! the man would give me a hint!" And the nobleman accompanied these words with a laugh.

"I don't know how to give hints to anyone, but I feel within me something of which nobody can deprive me, and which is called honor, and I know how it conquers anyone who would seek to overthrow it."

"What nonsense you are talking!"

"I am talking like a man in whose breast beats an honest heart; like a soldier who has seen the world, knows what it is worth, and values it no more highly than the dust on his boots. A man that made kings dance upon his fingers touched my hand one day! And have I fear of one who, though he may bear a name written on sheepskin and count his money in millions, thinks himself licensed to do as he wishes?"

"Why, the fellow is out of his mind!"

"Perhaps, Signor. But meantime do not you forget what this old madman tells you."

"For pity's sake," put in the pleading voice of Teresa, who understood nothing of what was going on.

"Oh, Signor Lorenzo," timidly added Stella, who understood everything, and would gladly have thrown herself into the arms of her chivalrous protector.

"I don't know," continued the veteran, quietly and severely, "when I see the vices of those whom the world calls great, whether there be such a thing as a Providence. But I know that, here and everywhere, the many are trampled upon by the few; that to be poor is even a crime, and that the aristocrats imagine they are blameless when they pay for their infamies with a little gold. But you do not see—and I speak to you because you are one of those I have in mind—you cannot understand all the evil with which these aristocrats amuse themselves. They enter our families and bring infamy with them as if it were a benefit. They seek forgetfulness from the annoyances of their lordly state, forgetfulness for a day, for an hour. And they never think of the grief, of the tears they leave behind, of the curses that call down upon their heads the vengeance of God! But it will not be always thus; we have seen days when the powerful also have reaped the misery sown by them in the world, and the days of the present will not be the days of the future, when justice will be of longer reach!"

"That man doesn't know what he is talking about!" interrupted the Illustrissimo, seeking to hide the storm that anger had aroused in his heart.

"And now, Signor, bear in mind two words more of 'that man.' I do not know how you have insinuated yourself into the confidence of these good people, nor can I venture to declare your motive. But sincere and honest good-will is timid, it hides itself. Your proud charity would parade its protection, and ill hides the shameful design that lurks beneath. Yes, I will speak frankly. I can guess the reason why you come into this house. But I have my eyes open, and if it be true"—

"That's enough; he is simply a madman," broke in the Illustrissimo, rising. "I don't know why I have borne until now with your senseless babble. If I chose, I could make you repent of what you have dared to think and to say."

The veteran sneered in his turn, folded his arms across his breast and stood immovable.

"I thank Heaven," he said, "that I arrived in time."

"Thank Heaven that it has removed your brains; had it not done so, you would see"—

And the old man rose to leave. The two women, pale and trembling, knew not what to make of the episode. But the Illustrissimo, having arrived at the door, turned and said to them, with a benevolent air:

"I regret to be able to do nothing for you; but my character will not permit it, as there are those who suspect my motives. Besides, this gentleman, who protects you so well, will no doubt do all I could have done."

And with this sneering farewell, he took his leave, turning over in his mind the mortification of his baffled plan, and the quickest means of wreaking his revenge.

When he had departed, Lorenzo remained motionless in the same place, his arms still crossed, his head bent, plunged in thought. Perhaps he wondered whether he had deceived himself, whether he had driven away from his friend's family an honest patron. But the more he thought of it, the more impossible it appeared to him that this rich man was not concealing a wicked intent, badly planned, perhaps, and remote in its aim, but none the less real. He could not talk about it with the women. He clearly saw their dismay. Nor did they know how to break the silence. They gazed wonderingly at the old soldier.

At this moment Damiano entered. He saw Lorenzo standing in the middle of the room, so perturbed that he did not notice his arrival, the mother with raised eyes apparently beginning a prayer, and Stella running toward him to embrace him, and to hide her face in his breast.

"What is the matter, mamma?" he asked.

This voice aroused Lorenzo. He moved toward the youth and grasped his hand.

"Thank Providence," he said, "that your old friend is still here, and can still do something. Know that I have arrived perhaps in time to prevent a great wrong, a disgrace that might have branded with shame your sister's brow and your mother's and your own, if chance had not led me to the track of him who was plotting it."

"What are you saying, Signor Lorenzo?" cried the lad, in a voice suffocating with anger.

"I tell you that a powerful man, one of those that toss a crust of bread to those they have mortally injured, has laid his eyes on your sister, and has had the heart to come here, he himself, only a few moments ago."

"God! It must have been the man who got into his carriage just as I reached the house."

"Yes, it was he! I hurled my suspicions in his face. I spoke for you, Damiano, and for myself. I saw that he trembled and that he wished to brave me out. Eh, I am an old fool, but my heart is always right, the heart of an honest man."

"Ah, but for the love of Heaven," Teresa ventured to say, "suppose that gentleman were angry with us, that he should try to revenge himself in some fashion? Perhaps he"—

"Perhaps? Perhaps what?"

"But—do you really believe that he came with evil intentions? He only wanted to see Damiano's picture. He wanted to buy it, do you understand? He said he wanted to buy it."

"Poor woman!" murmured Lorenzo, "you will always be the same."

"My picture?" cried Damiano with fury, "and how did he know about it?"

"Why, truly"—said Teresa, more troubled than ever.

"Well, go on, go on! Is there any mystery?"

"Somebody had told him about it—a kind person, too."

"Who? who?"

"You will be angry if I tell you."

"Will you explain? Heavens, Stella, speak! you speak!"

"Oh, Damiano," answered his sister. "Look at mamma! Don't make her cry."

"No matter, I must know who it is."

"Well, then," said the widow, taking courage, "it is a man that can help us, and help you, too; yes, indeed, he has often promised me to do so. It's that Signor Omobono."

"That man again!"

"Don't look so fiercely at me. Don't look at me that way!"

"Be silent! I now understand this infernal mystery. You are so good that you never will understand it. But heaven has once more protected us. And you, our friend," he continued, turning toward Lorenzo, "may God bless you!"

Having said this, Damiano relapsed into silence. He seemed to forget where he was, how much he had heard and said. A bitter smile was on his lips. From the painful expression of his face and from his gestures one could guess the war of emotions within his heart. Suddenly he rushed across the room into the next one, snatched his picture of Tancred from the wall, seized a rusty antique dagger which lay on the bed beside the table, and with growing fury set to slashing the picture into bits. The pieces fell to the floor, but, not yet satisfied, he took a savage joy in trampling the broken frame under his feet, with such portions of the canvas as still clung to it.

After this work of frenzied destruction, he laid down the dagger, raised his hands to his head, gazing around with terror as if he did not know where he was, and muttered:

"Now there is no fear that anyone will see you, O phantasm of a poor boy! I shall begin life anew."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CONSCRIPTION

IN a foggy day at the end of April, the drawing of lots for the conscripts of that year took place in Milan. A struggling multitude, agitated by fear, by hope, by all the emotions which move strong and simple minds, gathered that day in the second courtyard of the old palace of the Commune, the palace known, in the time of the dukes, as the Carmagnola, which afterward became the new Broletto and which still retains that name.

The crowd, composed mainly of young men from the city and surrounding country, of all trades, and all classes of the people swarmed around an enclosure of boards. Within was a platform protected by a pavilion of canvas embroidered in white and red, the ancient colors of the Commune. On the platform, around a large table covered with green cloth, sat various notable persons, attired in embroidered robes, and certain ecclesiastics in priestly garb, as assistants at the function. On this table, amid piles of stationery, registers, and documents, open under the eyes of those gentlemen, stood three urns, from each of which in turn were drawn, before the eyes of all, bits of paper inscribed with numbers and names, which, having been passed from hand to hand around the circle, were recorded in the books. A file of soldiers guarded the enclosure, striving to keep at a distance the crowd, which again and again hurled itself against the boards, seeking a nearer sight of the pavilion. One of the employés, while the others wrote, announced in a loud voice a number and a name, which was followed by visible agitation in that multitude.

Few were the numbers or the names called that did not provoke a cry either of joy or despair, a subdued

whisper, a confused murmur. Then the crowd opened to make way for some young man whose name had been drawn from the urn, and there followed words of congratulation or of comfort, handshakings or a waving of handkerchiefs and hats, and weeping women pushed through the throng to throw their arms around the neck of a son, a sweetheart, a brother.

It was a melancholy day for all. Even the sun hid behind a mantle of ashy gray clouds, which allowed no ray of sunlight to fall upon that assemblage. And soon it began to rain.

Standing not far from the place where the conscription was going on was a group of five persons, half hidden by one of the columns of the portico. With little external demonstration, but with hearts full of uneasiness and terror, they looked forward to the moment when the announcement of a number might decide for them also a long dreaded possibility. It was Damiano, with his mother and Stella and Celso; they had had the courage to come together to listen to their fate. With them also had come Rocco, the poor mad youth. They kept silent, but exchanged glances at every name that was called.

An hour passed. During that time many other mothers had had reason to tremble, or to thank God. Finally the official called the name of Damiano.

Nobody answered, nobody presented himself. In vain had the youth made a motion to step forward. A glance at his sister had shown him that on hearing that name she had turned pale, and leaned against the column of the portico to prevent herself from falling. He forgot everything, and remained rooted to the spot. He thought of what Stella was suffering, who until then had shown herself the most cheerful and confident of them all. He perceived that his mother, in all the confusion, deafened perhaps by the many who were talking around her, had not heard the name.

And he had not the heart to take the first step. Rocco, meanwhile, was looking around with wandering eyes, his hands in his pockets. At times he would nod slightly, as if reminding himself of some new-born project.

As no one presented himself to answer for Damiano, one of the priests on the platform placed his hand in the urn, a commissioner took the paper, cried out "Number Fifty-seven," and then passed it over to be registered.

Damiano's eyes once more encountered his sister's. Brother and sister, without saying a word, united in a single desire, that of concealing the fatal decision from their mother. She, not having heard her son's name called, deluded herself with the idea that he was safe, and thought that this might be the result of certain appeals she had secretly made to persons in authority. Celso, however, knew how matters stood. But Damiano, seeing that his brother's eyes were full of tears, bent to his ear, and, pressing his hand unobserved, whispered:

"Do not speak, Celso, do not speak, for our mother's sake! Who knows? God may still help me."

Then taking a step forward, he added tranquilly, "Let us go home, mamma; I shall not be called to-day; one of the commissioners told me so just now in passing. Let us go!"

"Yes, yes, my child, let us go, I hardly know in what world I am. And, after all, what is the use of staying here? Everything is in the hands of the Lord. He will listen to my prayers."

No word was spoken on the way home. But when they had ascended to their rooms, Stella sat down in her accustomed corner and wept bitterly. At the sound of that weeping the mother asked the reason and Damiano had to tell her that Stella had a headache, and was distressed because she could not work in those days when the needs of the family were greatest. But not wishing that her mother should hear her, and telling herself that they had enough sorrows without dwelling on those to

come, the girl succeeded in choking back the cry of her heart, and began to work as usual at her loom.

In truth, as one may imagine, the condition of that poor household during the last months has been pitiful enough. Their work in hand had diminished one half, through the illness of Teresa and through the loss of several customers on whom they had counted. On the other hand, their expenses had increased, and the money they had put away had been infringed upon. All that Damiano could make during the entire week hardly sufficed to keep them from day to day. The hour of misfortune had arrived. Thus, like many others who live in obscure and unknown poverty, because weariness and shame and the remains of pride make them hide it, they saw misery approaching, slowly indeed but implacably, after they had vainly believed that with courage and faith they could sustain the burden of life.

The only one who did what he could to help them, though he too was straitened by poverty, was the old Napoleonic soldier. But he could do very little. It is true that for the last year and a half he had paid the rent for his poor friends. Saying that he would do as he chose in the little time still left for him, he refused to listen to any words of gratitude.

Teresa, weak and confiding as ever, obstinately clung to the thought that the gentleman who had previously come to offer them his protection, if he had not already fulfilled his promise, would certainly know how to do so. In this belief she was confirmed by a recent visit from Signor Omobono, who in fact had called to try to exculpate himself with fair speeches from the suspicions which the aversion of Damiano had awakened in the widow's brain. And as the human mind too often desires to entrench itself as it were in contradiction, and discover flaws in the evidence, when the evidence has not been gathered by itself, it was not strange that Teresa, reproved by her son as blind and imprudent, remained in

her own heart firm in the opinion that she had not been deceived. But she dared not explain herself clearly to Damiano, since he had told her that he would rather die of hunger, and see her and his sister dead, than receive alms from that gentleman.

These words Teresa had not known how to understand. Nor could she guess that Damiano kept to himself his terrible reasons so as not to besmirch her, and to disturb the uncontaminated mind of his sister, with certain revelations which almost always leave behind them fears and poison.

On the day that seemed to decide Damiano's fate, they all sat down together to dinner. And as Celso, by permission of Father Apollinaris, could pass that day with his family, his mother had decided to make it a sort of holiday occasion. On the little table, besides the accustomed bowl of soup, appeared a plate of lean meat, and a cheese tart made that very morning by Stella, when she had been in hopes of congratulating Damiano on his good luck. Imagine with what various emotions they sat around that little table. The young people exchanged melancholy glances, and in order to hide from the mother, for that hour at least, that which, through Damiano's pious stratagem, she still knew not, they forced themselves to swallow a few mouthfuls and to speak cheerfully.

So Teresa, not having had for some time the consolation of seeing her three children gathered around her, and being certain that Damiano would escape the conscription, gave herself up to unusual happiness. She talked enough for all three. She wished her children to be in good spirits at her little dinner. But do what she might, she could not put heart into the others. After a time their words fell coldly and languidly, like the rare drops from a twig that has been cut off from its parent tree.

CHAPTER XXIV

ROCCO'S SACRIFICE

“**W**HY do you look at me in that way?” said Teresa at last, noticing that Damiano was gazing fixedly at her. He had been thinking that soon he would no longer behold the dear maternal face. For eight years was indeed a long time. At his return he might not find her on earth.

“Oh, nothing,” answered the youth; “I am glad to see you so much better than you were last week.”

“But surely you have something—some thought hidden away?”

“Why, what can I have to think about?”

“Come,” said Stella, “you know well, mamma, that Damiano has even too much to worry about. He might have been an honor and a stay to us, if they had only recognized his talent; and now we”—

“Don’t harp on that string,” interrupted Damiano, “I pray you from my heart! There are some men whom circumstances force into a way of life contrary to that which they see with their minds, and I am one of these. If it had not been necessary for me to earn my living, or if I had found courage to bend to earth before certain people, and to think better of the little that I am, I should have succeeded. Instead, I have done well to bid farewell to the mad idea that broke my sleep for so long a time. Yes, I have done my duty. If I had studied for years, perhaps I should never have become anything better than a whitewasher—what should I have brought you then? Misery!”

“Lay aside those thoughts, Damiano,” said Celso. “You deserve all the more for having renounced a future that might have been so beautiful. But if things went justly”—

"What do you expect? I am not the first, nor shall I be the last victim of injustice and intrigue. Oh, yes, I confess it; I had hoped that matters would turn out better. And the words of the great painter, whom I have never seen since that first time, remain in my heart. I know what happened. Two days before the closing of the competition, a better painting than mine was brought in. Many had understood, and had whispered in the ears of others, that it was from the hand of a recognized master, and that to give it a prize would have been a bit of brutal injustice. Notwithstanding, on that solemn day that picture bore the crown of laurel and a name. Many said it was not the name of him who had painted it. Perhaps that is not true. Perhaps it was the real name."

"But if it hadn't been for that wickedness," Stella hastened to say, "you would not to-day have"—

"Have what?" broke in the mother, "and are you also"—

"Nothing, mamma, nothing," answered Damiano, "you know Stella loves me so well"—

"But if instead," continued the mother, "you had listened to me, if you had let me speak of you to a certain prominent person, things would have gone differently. And even now if it hadn't come into my mind to put myself in the hands of some one, would you have escaped the conscription?"

"For pity's sake, mamma, don't talk so! You know there are certain things I cannot bear to hear you say."

"Perhaps I made a mistake in doing what little I, a poor woman, could do for your good?"

"Heaven bless you, mother! All the same, it would be better if you had not taken a course that might lead to evil."

"There you are, always discontented and finding fault! Oh, yes! Of course it is always I who do everything with my head in a sack, who believe in everybody, who compromise the entire family."

"But who says all this?" asked Damiano impatiently.

"Calm yourself, mamma; you know that we all love you," added Celso.

"Oh, yes, indeed! Calm myself! Hold my tongue! If you are not reproving me now, I remember other times. I know that he never meant any harm, that merchant who, on the contrary, has helped us in hard moments, nor that other gentleman who promised to assist you and could have done it. But there, he never wants to depend upon anybody, and toward gentlemen he has always had a—it's that blessed pride which he has inherited from his father, for even Victor, that good man, sometimes maddened one. But we must do differently in the future. As to me, if I worry, it is not for myself, it is for you others. I shall not last much longer, and the Lord knows"—

Here the mother burst out crying. Celso and Stella tried to calm her. Damiano hid his face.

"See, mother, what you do," he said at last. "You go in search of troubles. It is true that I obstinately persuaded myself that I alone sufficed for the family, but I did think it—I wished it. Now I feel that I trusted too much in myself; we are too poor; times are bad. I have worked and striven, but all to no purpose. Let us hope that He who is above will not abandon us. But if you knew all, mamma, if you could only see that when the rich man comes to the poor man it is rarely to do him good. But above all, beware of the poor man that sells himself!"

"It is impossible, I tell you. This is only your usual melancholy. Our house bears an honored name, and your father was a cavaliere."

"What matters it? We are poor, and all poor people have the same name!" cried the young man bitterly.

"But do you believe," the mother insisted, impatient at her son's opposition, "that I do not prize my honor? and that if I feared"—

"You are full of honest credulity, as ever. But suppose the day that opened your eyes were too late? Think of all that they could say of us—of my sister! Think of what happened last year—think of it!"

"Oh, yes, I have thought about it. From the hour that your father left me, I have been failing little by little; I am not here for long, and by and by it will be for you to do the thinking; then you can do as you choose."

The bitterness of these words struck the young people dumb. Seeing that their mother really felt very keenly, they deemed it better to keep silent than to continue to argue with her. But the unfortunate woman was to be pitied should her complaining be suffered to develop into something more than a habit—into an imagined right. On that day, too, living under the illusion that Damiano was safe, and having nothing to lament, she found a sort of pleasure in looking back at her past sorrows, a joy in touching the still living wounds of her own heart.

"Oh, yes, I know that I have done you no good; that I never can do you any good in this world; I no longer have my eyesight, not even to ply a needle among rags, as I have done until now. Perhaps I shall lose it altogether, but before this happens to me the Lord, I hope, will call me to himself."

"For heaven's sake, don't say that!" exclaimed Damiano. "What could we do without you? And what have we done to you that you should wish to abandon us."

"I don't mean that you wish me any evil. But nowadays all that I can do is to sit with my distaff in a corner; I am an encumbrance to you!"

"O Lord God, have pity on her and on us!" prayed Damiano, with an earnestness that sent a shiver through Celso and Stella, and even reached the heart of the embittered mother. "No," he continued, "I cannot keep silent any longer. I had intended to hide the truth, or put

off telling it as long as I could. But now you drag it out of me. It is not you that will depart from here, mother mine! But I—I, the poor madman, am the one that will go, and very soon. It is all over with me—I shall go where fate sends me. I am going as a soldier!”

“Holy Providence!” exclaimed the mother. “It is not true! It cannot be true! I know for certain that you are safe; they have promised me. It is you, Damiano, who wish to abandon me, but God—you will see!—God will punish you!”

“Well, then, dear woman,” said Damiano bitterly, “go on living in that belief; your fine gentlemen are protecting me; it is I that am abandoning you; I, who ought to work to earn you a livelihood, playing the shopboy, the clerk, the carpenter; and instead of that I have always been a black sheep.”

“For pity’s sake, Damiano, be quiet!” urged Stella; “see the state mamma is in, how she trembles, how she looks at you”—

“It is grief that makes you speak so,” added Celso, with a breaking heart. “All is not yet lost, and you wrong yourself, your good sense”—

“No, no, I tell you, mamma is right, and God is punishing me now because I have not done my duty. Cursed illusion! Cursed pride! If I had had the courage so many have, that all have, we should not be in these straits! Oh, mamma, you are right! God is punishing me—I deserve it. I will abandon home, and this place. this sky which made me feel that I was alive; I will go far, far away, I will never return. Celso will do all that I ought to have done. But, after a while, when you think of Damiano, you will pardon him then! Say that you will! And you will make a little room for him in your heart, and sometimes will speak of him with Celso and with Stella, will you not, mamma? Let me bear away with me this thought which will give me a little joy, make me forget years of solitude and slavery!”

Stella had broken into sobs. Without weeping, without speaking, the mother rose from her seat and opened her arms to her son. Damiano threw himself into them in a passion of love and grief.

When evening came Celso had to return to the house of his superior and his master. Damiano accompanied him thither. On the way the two lads exchanged confidences and consolations. But Damiano's heart was very bitter; more than once he broke out into words of wrath and malediction. Before leaving his brother, a few steps away from the rectory, he squeezed his hand tightly and said:

"When I am no longer with you, do you look after our mother, our sister, and our good name. Swear, Celso, swear by the hour in which our father died, woe to him who smirches his name!"

At the Ave Maria he reached home and wrote two letters, one to Signor Lorenzo, the other to his old friend the painter. He had not the heart to see either of them.

The distress, the terror, the agony that Damiano experienced that night, it is impossible to describe. All the courage which up to that time had made him strong against the miseries of life had vanished in an instant. He trembled at his own thoughts. Then with a convulsion of fear, gazing into his own heart, he felt lost, and, worse than all, he felt vile and wished to die.

To die? This word put darkness into his mind. But once he confronted the terrible idea, he could not drive it away. After many hours of soul-torture and of martyrdom, at the anticipation of the future which his soul shrank from meeting, wretched, heartbroken, he thought no more of his father's good name, of his mother or of his sister. Lying on the edge of his bed, his arms crossed over his breast, pale, motionless, he dwelt on a single thought. Then, rising quietly, he gazed around like one who commits a crime, took two or three turns around his room, and with a forced and almost frenzied

smile murmured: "I have lived long enough to know what life is; nobody will ever hear of me again. Never! Never!"

He had resolved to fly, to seek an obscure death, far from home, in some country where, fighting for a land that was not his own, he might soon end his life. He sought thus to escape from the fate which awaited him, from a sacrifice that was insupportable.

The lamp which spread a dying light over the table covered with papers, with drawings and scattered books, sent up a sudden flash like a tongue of fire and went out. Through the small panes of the window penetrated the first dim light of dawn.

Then Damiano sighed. A cold shiver ran through his bones. Nevertheless he raised his eyes to heaven. But his head drooped again upon his breast. The last hope had not quite fled.

He rose, determined to depart. But, passing before the half-open door of the other room, the thought of the two beings who loved him best on earth spoke to him with such force that he felt he could not tear himself away from life without wishing them a mute farewell, without looking, for the last time, on those to whom in spite of the best intentions he knew not how to give a single happy day.

He entered the other room slowly. The curtain of the alcove was raised. The heavy breathing of his sleeping mother reached his ears. He stepped forward and his heart beat more strongly. He saw Stella, who, kneeling at the foot of her mother's bed, with her head and her arms abandoned on the coverlet, was fast asleep. A shawl was tucked around her, her hair was disheveled, and she was lying in that posture in which we so often see an angel sculptured upon a tomb. The good girl had continued to work silently until late at night, then, while she knelt to pray beside the maternal bed, sleep had overcome her in the midst of her orisons.

An inexpressible calm settled upon Damiano's heart. That scene was like a word from heaven. As if a weight had been lifted from his heart, the dark thoughts which had tortured him, which had driven him to desperate designs, began to vanish.

Damiano sighed deeply. Suddenly the sleeper rose, in a daze. She recognized her brother, and threw herself on his neck with all the strength of grief, as if in his burning looks and his pallid face she had already read his hidden plan. While Stella held him in her embrace, Damiano felt peace return into his heart, it almost seemed as if heaven had opened for him. Finding himself in his sister's arms, hearing himself called by his mother, who at that moment awoke, he could no longer understand how a moment ago he had thought of flight, of death.

A little later the women rose and set the house in order. Stella, putting on her shawl and her veil, and making ready to go out to hear mass in the Cathedral, as was her custom when not too much pressed with work, ventured to ask Damiano to accompany her and their mother. And he, who for some time had not entered into the house of God, welcomed this invitation as an inspiration.

"Oh, you don't know," he said, "what good you have done me!"

He went with them, and there under the arches of the majestic temple, where as a child he had found his first inspiration and the splendid fantasies of art, prostrate before the tabernacle, he unveiled in prayer the secret of his heart and asked, in the simple invocation he had learned from his mother, for pardon and help from Him who, having given him his share of sorrow, now gave him this consolation.

They returned home, and Damiano felt like a new man. His lot appeared less sad to him; he ran over the many names that, before his turn had come, had been

drawn from the urn, and he found in himself the strength to resign himself to fate. That day and the next he spent in setting in order the few affairs of the family; he talked to Signor Lorenzo in order to confide to him the last of his earnings for that year; finally he even went to Signor Costanzo, to beg that he would keep in touch with his people and give him news about them when he was far away. Then he calmly awaited the day when the soldiers would visit him, and he should be borne away, and he hoped that the matter might be settled as early as possible.

For some weeks young Rocco had not paid his accustomed visits to his friends. Damiano and the women knew not what to think of his absence, when one morning the door opened and in he stepped, but so changed in manner and in attire that he was almost unrecognizable.

"Signora Teresa, Signorina Stella," he said in a timid and broken voice, "I have come to salute you because—I am going far away from here—whither God wills."

He extended one hand to them; on the back of the other he wiped his eyes. He was dressed in a new overcoat of coarse cloth, he wore ill-fitting black gaiters and on his soldier's cap was sewed the number "8." A quiet joy shone in his eyes, although a mist of tenderness and a vague feeling of shame made him blush and arrested his speech. Then, planting himself firmly on his feet, he placed his open hand to his cap, imitated in burlesque fashion the soldier's salute, and stood as if at attention.

Damiano had gone out, and the two women could not at first understand the metamorphosis in the boy's appearance. But when he stammered out that this was the day when he was to disappear with musket and knapsack, and when he handed them a paper for Damiano, sealed with a big seal, and turning on his heel ran awkwardly against the door—then like a flash the truth came

to Stella. Running toward him with her face bathed in tears of joy and gratitude, she could not help embracing him and crying:

"May God reward you, our friend and our protector! He will accept your sacrifice, He alone can bless you!"

With these words she let her head fall upon the simple but sublime heart of Rocco.

The boy blushed to his eyes, looked embarrassed, tried to speak, but could only say:

"What I am doing, I was entrusted to do by my good angel."

Brusquely escaping from the inquiries, the thanks, and the blessings of mother and daughter, for he feared that Damiano might soon return, he added: "Pray sometimes for me also, who never knew father or mother, to whom no one has ever been kind but you!"

And he hastened away without the courage to turn his head.

He left with the widow the papers showing that he had entered the military service in lieu of Damiano. Next morning, with a light and contented heart, and with the persuasion that he had done the most natural thing in the world, he set out with the other conscripts for far-away countries, whence possibly he never would return.

CHAPTER XXV

A CHANGE OF FORTUNE

A YEAR sees many changes in men and things, but God's is the guiding hand. A year seemed to pass swiftly to the family of Damiano after the events already narrated. As it happened, misfortune, which before that year had been so implacable in its persecutions, seemed to have forgotten

their poor life, disdaining perhaps to put to any severer test these simple and courageous hearts. So in those days the heavens had been serene over their heads, and though life in many ways had not changed for them, at least it passed more tranquilly and contentedly, and its cheerful happenings implanted in their hearts that expectation of a pleasant future.

Damiano, when he learned of the incomparable sacrifice that Rocco had made for him, at first utterly refused to accept it. He turned a deaf ear to the entreaties and the sobs of his family. He appealed to the authorities to break the obligation incurred in his stead by his companion; he ran hither and thither, but he could do nothing. Everything was according to rule, for Signor Lorenzo himself, without saying anything to the family, had extended a hand to help Rocco in carrying out his generous scheme. No other remedy was left him than to enroll himself in company with his friend. But the latter declared that he would not leave the military service to which, as he said, he had pledged himself through military ardor. Furthermore, the battalions of the new conscripts had already departed. But it needed all the authority and all the eloquence of his father's old comrade to dissuade Damiano from his obstinate determination to share the lot of the man who had offered up his own liberty for his. In secret the old soldier nourished other and prouder dreams for Victor's son.

But internal discontent and the shock of so many conflicting emotions, as well as the hard work he had to do in those days, resulted in breaking down the strength of Damiano. A violent fever vanquished his obstinacy and made him consent that Rocco instead of himself should yield eight years of his life. In this long illness Stella never forsook his bedside, and Damiano, ever gloomy and taciturn, would sometimes smile affectionately when his sister sat beside him, seeking with ingenuous sweetness to sprinkle some balm upon his wounded

and melancholy soul. She alone could know what Damiano suffered, she alone had the strength to soften the agony of the invalid, and distract his mind from the phantasms that assailed it.

Damiano had sworn to bid farewell forever to art, the dearest thing he had ever known on earth. As he had failed at the first step, he saw before him still greater difficulties to overcome at every future step—the need of a severe master who would force him to keep his feet in the right path, and still more the tyranny of want, which imposed upon him the duty of working without pause to sustain his own life and the lives of two persons dearer to him than his own—everything had persuaded him to renounce his first dream of glory, and to set himself to find some simple and certain employment which would bring him daily bread. So the voice of duty spoke more strongly. His reason told him that the artisan, if he be active and honest, can be useful and even great in his mediocre sphere, more truly than the triumphant artist who prostitutes his genius to holiday passions, or fashionable licentiousness, more truly than the rich man who fancies himself a philanthropist and a patron of the arts because he blindly throws his gold to any men who will sell themselves for his dinners, his villas and his festivities. Damiano resigned himself, therefore, because he lacked leisure and freedom and opportunity for study, to find a humbler trade, for which honesty, good will, and a pair of stout arms would suffice.

But having fallen ill, he had to postpone carrying out his project. Meanwhile the death of the poor painter Costanzo, his friend and master, an event which Stella had vainly sought to conceal from him, so greatly increased his sadness that he spoke no more of the past, trying to console himself with the thought that he had renounced the idea of succeeding in art.

On his recovery, Damiano's first act was to pay the

last tribute of his heart to the simple and kindly man whom he had loved as a brother and venerated as a father. He had walked out to the cemetery of St. George, outside the Oriental gate, where the old painter had been buried after the plainest sort of funeral. This man had seen all his hopes vanish one by one, and yet had been able to preserve in his modest mind the youthful illusions, the cheerfulness, and the peace of a life which had begun and ended in a bare little studio. The only unfulfilled wish he had left behind him was that of saving enough money to enable him to go to Rome and die in the Eternal City, in the fatherland of the artists, as he was wont to call it. Damiano dropped a few tears upon the new-made grave of his friend, regretting that he had not been able to be with him in his last moments and fearing that the old man had imagined himself deserted by him, as well as by the rest of the world.

A month later, the young man had begun a new life, and felt content with the resolution he had made. He had hired himself to one of the most esteemed wood-carvers in the city. At that time had come back into fashion, in the houses of the nobles, the ancient style of furniture, doors and mirror-frames carved with leaves and arabesques; cornices furnished with bizarre emblems: flowers, cherubs, sphinxes and all the other caprices of the art born in the age of Bernini. Damiano, who by native aptitude and study knew how to draw these ornaments and had acquired facility in sketching figures and trimmings, was welcomed gladly by the owner of the shop, who immediately made him director and supervisor over the other artisans.

Then, as he wished to succeed in an art allied to that he loved so well, he set himself energetically to acquire that mastery in it which had brought fame and fortune to not a few. Seeing, however, how easy it was to fall into the false, the trite and the effeminate, he devoted himself to the study of the famous designs of Raphael,

which are still the marvels of all who see them in the loggia of the Vatican; he fell in love with that savor of ancient art with which Cellini informed his delicate and admirable inventions; and he sought, in so far as in him lay, to make all the work carved in his master's shop bear some reminiscence of that delicacy of Italian art which never dissevers itself from true beauty.

Consequently every bit of work, no matter how humble, that was turned out by Signor Natale's establishment, from the modest cornice of rare wood to the large carved chair, the sculptured pavilion, and the superb bookcase, decorated with statuettes and bas-reliefs, was such as to attract the attention of connoisseurs, who found in it excellences of idea or of detail.

In a short time, the wealthy shop of Signor Natale outstripped all its rivals in that art. Commissions doubled themselves in a few months. Certain manufacturers and dealers in foreign furniture (who must cater to the conceited tastes of the rich men that turn up their noses at the products of their own country) caused these ornaments and objects to be copied privily and then sold them at a high price as precious novelties just arrived from Paris and London.

The perfection of their work enabled the firm to raise their prices. Therefore they could afford to raise the wages of the workmen. All this Signor Natale owed to the zeal and activity of his new employé. Consequently, at the end of the first quarter, he increased his salary from three to four lire a day, and held out hopes of more, if the industry continued to grow at this rate.

Damiano now found himself more contented with his lot. Poverty, which had hitherto held him and his family in its clutches, no longer terrified him, as he realized that with good will and resignation a man can suffice for himself and for his own in any circumstances. The artisans of whom he was the head wished him well because he was always kind and good to them, and showed

them proper respect. His mother and sister, who through his efforts were now enjoying better days, never ceased blessing him, and lived content with his contentment, seeing their dear one, who had formerly been so melancholy and disdainful, now serene and at peace.

The master-carver's shop was situated in one of the widest and most frequented streets. It was large and well-ordered, furnished with machines and models whose like could be found nowhere else in Milan. There were thirty or more workmen, among whom the carving was distributed according to their various degrees of expertness. All were under the supervision of Damiano, who held the place of chief designer. And these workmen, most of whom were young, obeyed him readily because he held them as friends and companions, exacting from them only punctuality, activity, and harmony.

The workmen were separated in three large divisions on the ground floor, well lighted by many high windows. The tables of the modelers, the carvers, and the simple carpenters, succeeded one another in a long line, so that each could apply himself to his own work, yet all were under the eye of the master, who only had to come in every now and then at the principal entrance to the factory, and to turn a look all around, to convince himself that the work was progressing in the quickest and most orderly fashion. At the head of the factory, on a platform surrounded by a wooden railing, was Damiano's little studio. Standing here to design, or to examine and correct the designs prepared by the modelers, he kept an alert eye on everything that was going on, and his very presence was sufficient to quell the disturbances that sometimes, though seldom, arose.

Thus, a paragon compared with what it once had been, Signor Natale's factory became a model of order and punctuality, where the uneasy and restless spirit of the many was held in leash by the gentleness and good sense of one.

The days, busy, but diversified by the various duties of his new occupation, now passed cheerfully with Damiano. Every morning he found himself at his desk. Amid his drawings, his few books on art, the varied and fantastical creations of pencil or brush, surrounded by honest men among whom was not one who would not, as the saying is, have gone to the fire for him, he felt an increase of the content which comes from duty performed, and from virtue confident of the issue, and he thanked Providence for having made him renounce loftier but more anxious hopes.

When at night he returned home and found the old mother engaged in preparing the more substantial dinner which their mended fortunes permitted, when he heard his sister singing as she sat at her work-table stitching rapidly so as not to lose the last rays of the sun dying behind the gilded pinnacles of the Duomo, then, proud to think that this modest peace and comfort was all his work, the young man felt a joy that he never had experienced or hoped for in the past, and tears of tenderness rose to his eyes. Even Teresa, restored to health for many months, was no longer troubled with the gloom that had previously saddened her; and if now, through increasing years and failing eyesight, she could no longer sew all day long as she formerly could, she rejoiced at least in being always at work somewhere in the house and being able to think of a hundred things. Moreover whatever was earned by her children was shared with her, and she no longer found herself painfully economizing in order to save them all from starvation.

And when the honest lad was able out of his savings, or through a present from his chief, to buy a gown or a hat for Stella, a woolen shawl or a snuff-box for his mother, it was a holiday occasion in the family, a delight for the whole week. Those excellent souls almost forgot the memory of their past misfortunes, and they

thanked God that He had not forgotten them. Teresa's dearest wish was for the arrival of the time, now not long distant, when Celso, having said his first mass, should obtain some small parish in the neighborhood and a little rectory, so that she might have all her family gathered around her.

CHAPTER XXVI

BIRDS OF PREY

ONE day at the factory Damiano crossed over to the studio of Signor Natale, situated on the opposite side of the court, taking the day-book with him, as was his custom, so that the principal might look over it before paying the wages of the artisans. He had hardly touched the handle of the door when he heard two voices raised in dispute. One was the voice of Signor Natale; the other, sharp and imperious, sounded familiar. But he could not remember where he had first heard it. As he was about to retire, the principal, recognizing that some one had approached, cried out:

"Signor Damiano, is that you? Come in; I have something to say to you."

The young man entered. As he raised his eyes to a person who stood opposite his chief, in a proud and disdainful attitude, he felt his blood boil within him. A deep flush overspread his face, a mist clouded his eyes. He stood still, and forced himself to be calm and self-contained. He had understood that this personage was having a dispute with his master, possibly deferring until another year the payment of a bill for costly furniture which was already in arrears. But when this gentleman's glance met that of Damiano, speech died on his lips, a document which he held slipped from his hand,

and involuntarily lowering his eyes before the anger that flamed in those of the young man, he turned very pale. The haughty words he was about to fling at the merchant finished in a babble of phrases that meant nothing.

"Well, what is the matter, Signor?" asked the merchant in surprise, not knowing how to explain this unexpected change of tone, this sudden descent from a lordly assumption of disdain at the mere appearance of a witness.

"Nothing, nothing!" stammered the gentleman, "I was saying—I was thinking—I believed—you need not doubt—I will pay soon. Come to my house to-morrow, you yourself, understand me—or even to-day—and the twelve hundred lire will be paid."

"When you talk this way, you are reasonable, Signor," answered the merchant. "Excuse me, please, if I forgot to be respectful. You see we count upon our large credits. They are our capital. But, I repeat, if it is inconvenient to pay the bill immediately, I can wait a few days more."

"No, come to-morrow. I shall expect you, and I bid you good-day." And, as if he found himself in an atmosphere in which he could not breathe, he stepped backward toward the door. Damiano bent his head in pity. All the wrath which at first had swollen his heart disappeared, and thinking of the dastard soul which could flee with terror before a single glance of his eye, he wished to spare him a greater shame, and made no answer to his chief, who, finding the whole scene unintelligible, asked him whether he knew the gentleman.

It was no other than the Cavaliere Lodovico, that young scoundrel, who a year previously had thought it would be so easy a task to seduce Damiano's sister. He had become an idle and elegant married man. In his own house, which was furnished throughout in the revived *rococo* fashion of the sixteenth century, he passed as a

type of the man of taste. After his marriage and honeymoon trip, his increased importance, and his inheritance of the paternal titles and estates, the Cavaliere Lodovico had not again seen Damiano, he who, in the other's house, had dared to cast defiance at him, and call him an assassin. Perhaps he had not again thought over that trifling adventure. But finding himself, when he least expected it, face to face with a man whom he hated more than anyone else, all the more that his own cowardly heart forbade him to look him twice in the face, the thought that this man could if he chose hurl him from the pedestal on which he had so painfully climbed, sufficed to produce the strange effect Damiano noticed.

As he reached the door the nobleman accidentally stumbled. In regaining his balance he glanced around as if for help. Signor Natale was about to run to his assistance, fearing he might fall. But Damiano, extended his arm and detained the merchant. Looking coldly at the cavaliere, he said, with a slow smile of irony, "Let him alone, Signor Natale, the cavaliere has only made a false step!"

Lodovico took his leave. But hatred raged in his heart, and as was natural with a man so base, he from that moment began to plan some hidden and certain revenge for the humiliation he had undergone.

Damiano made no explanation to his principal, who, suspecting something, repeated his inquiry. Nor that evening, when he had returned home, did he speak of the incident to his family, although the sight of that man had awakened the old bitterness in his soul and the old pain at an insult which he had not been able to fling back into the teeth of the insulter. When facing the latter he had felt a momentary joy at having made him falter with shame by a single glance. But this proud delight had passed away in an instant. The memory of the past seized upon him, and tormented him for many days.

Not more than a week had passed since that ill-omened meeting, when one day Damiano left the shop a little before the accustomed hour, and, as he emerged from the Piazza Fontana, he saw some one turning into the doorway of his house. He thought he recognized another man whom he had not met for a long time—a man whom he looked upon with reason as the author of all the evils that had invaded his home, the only person, perhaps, for whom he felt himself capable of absolute hatred. In a word, it was Signor Omobono.

At the mere sight, a crowd of thoughts rushed into his brain. His heart beat more rapidly and he redoubled his steps. He had immediately guessed that the villain, deeming him absent, had not feared to return to his home. He was full of suspicion that this was not for the first time; that his mother, in her weakness, had again given credence to the man's lies, and, blind with rage which made him freeze and burn at the same time, he rushed up the stairs and caught him at the second landing.

Then he planted himself in front of the old man to bar his way, and angrily raising his head he demanded: "What are you doing here?"

"I am here on my own business," replied the other in a hard tone; "you would do well to attend to your own."

"You don't know me any more?"

"I do not know who you are. But let me alone, I tell you."

"You don't know who I am?"

"I know that you are a bold fellow."

"I am exactly what you say, and it were better for you not to put your foot any more in this house, if you value your breath. Will you bear that in mind?"

"You are mad! Let me go, or I will call some one."

"You will call no one. But you will listen to what I have to say."

And coming closer he grasped the other's arm with

convulsive strength, so that, fearing an explosion the man turned around in alarm to see whether anyone were coming.

But Damiano held him fast, and, sweeping his eyes over him from head to foot, and shaking his head, he said in a low but threatening voice: "We are poor; but we have no need of you nor of him who sends you. We are honest people; you eat the bread of infamy; you are worse than a thief, worse even than a spy."

"Take care what you say!" gurgled the other.

"I know what your trade is, you fiend! But take care! Remember that I have my eye upon you, and I swear by the God above us that you shall not succeed in your infamous design. If I ever find you again on these stairs you will measure their length in a single bound, I promise you that!"

"Let me alone!"

"Go now—or no, wait!"

He crushed the other's arm again in his iron grip. Omobono was livid. He felt his courage fail.

"You will tell the man who sends you, or pays you, that I shall know how to thwart him as I am now thwarting you. Say to him that, though he wallows in gold and can purchase justice, I will make a justice of my own. Now go, toothless hound, you damnable scoundrel!"

These last words, spoken in a loud voice, as he gave his enemy a rousing kick, were overheard by two pacific neighbors who were climbing the steps behind them. The rascally Omobono, not wishing to seem as if he were swallowing compliments which, in fact, were a little too well deserved, made a last attempt at defense, and, freeing himself from Damiano's grasp, he sought with all his strength to give him at least one blow. But the youth caught his arm in mid-air, and with the open palm of his other hand he slapped him full in the face,

crying: "Let this be a reminder to you of the things I have told you, which will remain between you and me."

The old man had had enough. With a howl of pain and rage he leaped down the steps three or four at a time, hiding his face as he passed the accidental witnesses to the affair. The latter broke into a laugh at sight of a man fleeing in so deplorable a plight, like a cur with its tail between its legs.

The meeting with the Cavaliere Lodovico and that with Signor Omobono sufficed to poison Damiano's peace of mind for some time. He did not omit to remind his mother of her former imprudences and to warn her of the new dangers that surrounded Stella. He recalled the name of his father, and ended by saying:

"God will not abandon the poor, when the latter are not ashamed of their poverty."

About this time news reached our family from the borders of Hungary. A letter scrawled over with hieroglyphics, in a language more Turkish than Italian, had been written to them in Rocco's name by some good Transylvanian soldier. For the first time, after many months, he had sought to let his good friends know that he was alive and well. He informed them that he was content; that the memory of Damiano and Stella was always with him in these Lutheran countries where, night and day, under a mud-colored sky, he did sentinel duty along a frozen river in sight of the snow-clad lands of Russia. This rough scrawl affected Damiano not a little, and drew tears also from Stella and his mother. He immediately wrote to his far-away friend, telling him, as well as he knew how, of his more than fraternal love for one who had been more than a brother to him; and he ventured to send him at the same time a fine Genovese pistole, well wrapped up in paper, which was part of his savings for that year, telling him to accept it for the sender's sake, because among brothers every-

thing was in common. The thought of this incomparable soul mitigated Damiano's bitterness for that day.

One Sunday, a little before evening, Signor Omobono, hardly a week after he had received that ugly lesson which still seared his heart, was sitting in company with a kindred spirit in one of those dark tobacco shops near the gates of the city, where friends of the pipe and the card-table are wont to resort for the purpose of forgetting the present at the bottom of glasses of brandy.

Signor Omobono spoke in a low tone, but he gesticulated furiously. His listener, bronzed, surly-faced, with thick black eyebrows and a gray moustache, listened with sinister glances and an accompaniment of low growls and head-shakings. His elbows rested on the table and now and then he beat his fists upon it.

"So you have understood me, Signor Martini," Omobono said finally.

"Eh! You almost break my eardrums with your continual repetitions of 'Signor Martini,'" he snarled.

"Here, now, don't be so ugly."

"Is it necessary to mention names?"

"No, I know it isn't necessary, and I beg your pardon, but nobody knows you here. You were once Martini, then you were Martino, now you are the Signore Martigny. Who the devil will recognize you under your gray skin?"

The other smiled with strange complacency. Brandishing by the middle, with a rapid motion, his Indian cane armed with a leaden top, he raised it above his head and twirled it round and round with an air of braggadocio that excited the smothered curses of the bystanders and of the shopkeeper on her bench.

"Take care," resumed Omobono, "that you manage in such a way as to compromise nobody. You know our friend; he's an ass, a simpleton. With one blow you can make him bite the earth."

"It may be as you say, but you can understand that I don't wish to mix myself up in this affair," said his companion, suddenly changing his voice to a loud tone, "unless some question of honor is involved."

"It is an affair of honor, I assure you—an important affair."

"I hardly know," Martigny resumed, now lowering his voice again, "what it's all about, but I don't look upon it as anything very subtle. As to your friend, I know him somewhat—a scatterbrain, but he knows how to look out for himself; I saw him on a certain occasion keep up his end, as they say, very effectively."

"Maybe, but all the same he deserves a lesson; he is one of the *canaille*."

"*Canaille*? Go softly! One of my sort doesn't concern himself with the *canaille*. And besides, I tell you that he has no pigeon's heart, and he bites those that attack him."

"My employer, the gentleman of whom I spoke to you—for I must tell you I don't enter this adventure for nothing—why, I hardly know that boy and even though he has done me harm I bear him no rancor. But, as I was about to say, with another sort of person, such as the one I spoke to you about, the thing is different. Of course my employer could not meet one of that breed in a duel—none the less he has an old score to settle with him at any cost. And he—do you understand? When he pays, he pays well."

"That is the least important thing of all," said his colleague, shaking his head, but involuntarily rubbing his hands at the same time. "As to the rest, it is for you to supply the occasion, because in matters of this sort I am not used to kindling the fire, and in order not to expose myself to future trouble I am never the prime mover. I wish the matter to be as clear as fresh water."

"I will attend to that, I tell you; don't be afraid of anything. I do not intend that a man like you, a friend,

shall attempt anything unless it is quite certain that you shall emerge with honor. Even for myself, this is more important than you can imagine. So we are, as the saying is, as safe as two princes; and in certain cases, you understand, we are never in the wrong. There are people who will close an eye."

"Very well. Therefore"—

"Therefore, you will see me next Sunday at the latest. The place, I will indicate to you. But silence, Signor Mar"—

"Again! The devil!"

And he pounded the table so violently that his companion cut off the name at the first syllable.

"Let it be as if it were unsaid. Another bottle, and let us be friends as before."

"Eh, I am tired of your beer; it is not even good enough to rinse the mouth with. Let them bring us some good cognac, that warms my blood."

"Waiter! Cognac, and good cognac!"

"Immediately!" shouted back the mistress of the place. A thin young man, emerging from another room, placed in front of the two worthies a straw-covered flask and two "pony" glasses, upon a pewter tray. He uncorked the flask, and filled the glasses with liquor.

"To the health of that friend of ours!"

"As you will! And to our own!"

Signor Omobono, who had ordered the brandy, began to sip it slowly. The former master of fence tossed off his glass at a draught, and accepting a second which his companion poured out for him, disposed of it in the same fashion, as if it were a mild cordial. Drawing from the pocket of his long blue coat a small pipe and a bag of tobacco, he filled the bowl, and then, lighting it at a little lamp burning in a corner, he pulled his hat down over his eyes, and left the place in company with his worthy friend.

CHAPTER XXVII

CELSO AND HIS MASTER

IN a small and lonely room of the ancient rectory Celso passed his days in ecclesiastical study and silent meditation, under the rigid discipline of Father Apollinaris, his teacher and protector. We have already seen how much this man was revered, how powerful he was in a certain exalted sphere of society. The ex-friar (for such he was, even though everybody still called him "father" as a sign of respect) had come some years ago to Milan, but no one knew the reason for the long stay he had made there.

So far as was known, he never had been a luminary in his congregation, but with his peculiar austerity of speech, with frigid manners, and with a kind of ascetic indifference to the things of the world, he might have been engaged in high and mysterious aims. For a long time he had been in search of some humble and gentle person whom he could bend to his own wishes. Such a person he thought he had found in Celso.

The good clerical student had passed no little time in assiduous obedience to even the smallest wish of Father Apollinaris, whom he called his benefactor, not moving a step out of doors without his permission, nor detaching himself from the dusty folios his superior made him digest, nor visiting his family too often, nor even going out to read the office of the Madonna in the ancient church to which the rectory was annexed.

He loved his studies, and the calm of meditation, and, having early turned the energies of his mind and heart to the contemplation of the sacred doctrines, he knew how to find in this study the solace of his mind, its only aim. In the morning after service, to which he accompanied the father, to serve him at mass, and later to at-

tend him in the sacristy, he would return home with him, and while his superior, in the damask armchair beside the hearth, slowly sipped his chocolate, he, sitting at the other side, would read to him aloud from the last quarterly number of *The Voice of Truth*, or from the *Memorials of Religion and Morals*, which reading the father from time to time would interrupt with some pious comment made between mouthfuls of toasted bread. Then Celso would retire to his own room, where an old maid-servant would bring him a scanty dish of watery broth, his customary breakfast. The poor youth would think of his mother, of the poverty in his own house, and this meager repast seemed to him abundant. He then set himself to his studies, studying with the quiet delight of good and timid souls, until the servant returned to his room and summoned him to the parlor.

There Father Apollinaris would regale him for a good half hour with a series of counsels and moral instructions, comprising the quintessence of his theological doctrines, which, to the studious abbot, though he dared not confide the thought even to the air and felt conscience-stricken at it, seemed rather poor stuff. In this fashion the former friar subjugated, little by little, this tender mind, so sensitive to duty. The multitudinous affairs of which the father was the center, exacted from him an extensive and vigilant correspondence, with which he was not able to cope alone. He might have invited a companion to join him there, but this course would have been neither easy nor prudent. Furthermore, the father did not desire companions, nor reunions. So the idea had occurred to him to train some one under his own eyes, to mold him, as it were, to the form he desired, so that he should be his puppet, knowing no other will than his, submissive, mute. This lot had fallen to our good Celso.

The daily spiritual conference over, the father, at one o'clock, allowed his pupil to keep him company at din-

ner. Then, unless seriously preoccupied, it would please him to throw aside his rough husk, and to talk, though always with cautious reserve of worldly matters and of town gossip, to which he did not disdain to listen, chatting even with Dorothea, the old woman that served him. Celso, from time to time, put in a timid word. But if he happened to disagree with the father, the servant would almost jump at his throat; and if in these rare encounters the ex-friar took the woman's part, he looked as if he would annihilate the boy with his eyes.

A short nap followed after coffee, and then the father left the house. As a rule he did not return until such time as he had found out all he wished to know and all he had to do. Celso went back to his room, to his faithful Latin volumes and his solitary meditations. Toward evening he might be seen, with downcast eyes and arms crossed over his breast, traversing the grassy courtyard and entering the church through the door of the sacristy. There, in the shadow of the choir near the altar, he would read and pray until, the benediction for the evening having been said, the church was deserted. In those hours Celso's soul lifted itself to heaven. He prayed for his own family, asked from God the grace to walk in the right path, and offered Him the sacrifice of his youth and the incense of his faith.

Even in this severe and monotonous life, Celso hoped and loved, but simultaneously he experienced a weariness, a melancholy, which not infrequently changed into doubt and terror. This was due to the influence of the spirit of his superior, which had already begun to penetrate into his own, and which filled him with lassitude, he knew not why. The true and holy word of religion does not dry up the heart, but leads it graciously to what is right; it is not a word of anger and revenge, but of pardon and love.

To Celso had been given a sensitive soul in a slender and delicate body. Therefore that blind and fearsome

doctrine which insensibly had been instilled into his heart by the ex-friar poisoned all faith in good, and prostrated him in long and dolorous uncertainty. Thinking over the past, his mind gradually cleared and he felt more strongly the need of loving those who lived and suffered with him; he venerated the thought of his mother; he had no other desire than to see the people who were dear to him and to live with them.

At the mere sound of his superior's voice, however, he bent his head, fulfilled his lightest behests, and almost always repented of the thoughts he had cherished. If he went out of the house, he walked timidly, keeping close to the wall, wrapped in his short cloak, his face lean and pale, but full of sweetness, his lips thin and white, his head bowed. Often he excited the laughter of the passers-by. But more than one, looking at him with a secret compassion, would say, "That poor little priest never will live to say his first mass!"

Thus, through lack of aliment, his obscure life seemed to be consuming itself in silence, like a forgotten lamp in the corner of some deserted church.

The old clock that ticked on the mantelpiece of the ex-friar's parlor had already struck six in the afternoon, but Father Apollinaris, contrary to custom, had not yet arrived home. Dorothea, sitting by the window in the basement kitchen, her spectacles on her nose, was hulling melon-seeds into a dish. She moved her jaws as if she were chewing, but in reality she was grumbling at the tardiness of her master. Celso had shut himself into the parlor awaiting the master, as he thought was his duty.

Sitting in a corner, he held a book in his hand whose acquaintance he had made recently by mere accident. He had found it while searching in the father's library. This book had moved him from the first chapter, and raised a commotion among his humble convictions, awaking reason and sentiment within him. In his

heart was kindled a flame which might easily and quickly consume the scanty crop sown during nearly two years by the hard and arid words of the father. He read, and tears rolled down his cheeks, a vast and unknown region seemed to open before his intellect.

The book was an old edition of Pascal's *Thoughts*.

Old Dorothea had early found that the lad did not care to engage in such controversy with her as she might turn to her own profit. She rarely spoke to him, therefore, save to say something offensive or humiliating. But now, urged by a desire to find out the reason why the master had not yet returned, she entered the room, under the pretext of putting things in order; and began to prod him with queries, to which he paid not the slightest attention.

The parlor was square, with a low ceiling. Its walls, divided into compartments, were frescoed with garlands interlaced with bunches of grapes and interspersed with shells and little birds. Some dim old paintings in tarnished black frames adorned them, after rotting for two centuries in the refectory of some convent. From the two windows hung percale curtains, which had turned from white to yellow, and were worn threadbare. On the floor was a carpet that had once been green; facing the fireplace was a fine mahogany sofa covered with an elegant quilt in vivid colors—a bit of furniture worthy of a lady's boudoir. Above the mantelpiece, beside the mirror, hung little pictures of saints and madonnas, embroidered on silk by noble and devout hands; on the table was a little heap of ascetic books, manuals, rituals, and the breviary. Scattered here and there upon the bookcases were a hundred little objects of art, which gave evidence of the ex-friar's pretensions to be considered a connoisseur: statuettes of wax or of porcelain, vases or baskets of alabaster filled with fruits and flowers, and elegant trifles in counterfeit gold—souvenirs and votive gifts from illustrious acquaintances.

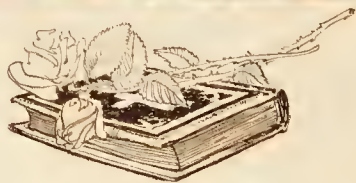
Upon the desk was ranged a formidable phalanx of Latin folios, bound in sheepskin, which, though they had not been touched for years, could not fail to impress visitors with a high idea of the father's theological knowledge. Under a great crucifix carved in boxwood, hanging on the wall between the window and the fireplace, was the *prie-dieu*, and hard by a comfortable arm-chair covered with red serge. It was there that various titled sinners, admitted to the father's intimacy, came on certain days to prostrate themselves at his feet.

On the other hand rose the private library, closed by corrugated glass doors from the eyes of the profane. Here in a secret compartment was buried all the father's correspondence, and everything that might compromise him in the eyes of people whose vigilance it would not be convenient to attract. Another bookcase, red and open and cumbered with old theological volumes, stood in the little alcove. This was the bookcase which the father opened for the young student in those early days of bookish enthusiasm which had driven every other thought from his mind.

Meanwhile Dorothea chewed on her own bad humor, seeing that Don Celso had not even noticed her coming. Suddenly in the other room a bell rang, first lightly, then repeated with greater energy. The maid knew at once that it was not her master's ring. She could not imagine who had come at that hour. She turned to run and see. But her steps were not hasty enough to suit the impatience of the ringer. Before she had crossed the antechamber and lighted the grating of the door to see who was outside, a fiercer pull set the bell to ringing again.

"How annoying you are! Mercy me! but you will make me curse," muttered the old woman.

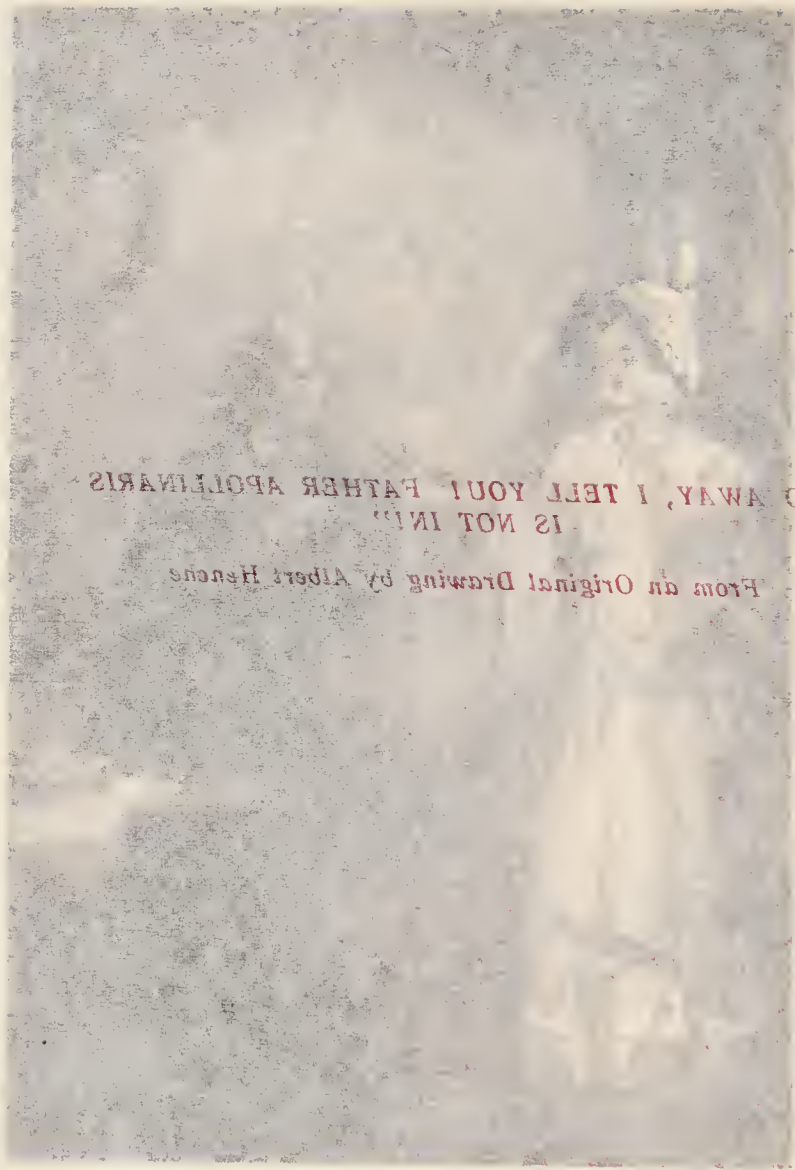
She half opened the door, and beheld a young girl, who modestly, even timorously, stood with bowed head, without word or motion.



"GO AWAY, I TELL YOU! FATHER APOLLINARIS
IS NOT IN!"

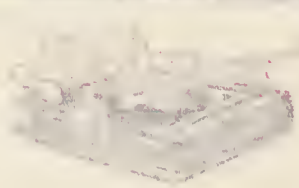
From an Original Drawing by Albert Henche

A



"GO AWAY, I TELL YOU! FATHER ABOLITIONARIES
IS NOT IN!"

From an Original Drawing by Albert Hennessy



"Who are you? What do you want at this hour?"

"Ah, if you knew! Excuse me, let me tell you"—

"Why excuse? Who are you?"

"Perhaps you don't remember me. I am the sister of Celso. I must speak a word with him at once."

"You must? At once! Sister? What sister?"

"It is a matter of the greatest importance! For the love of God, let me enter."

"You're a fine one! Am I supposed to know you? This is not the hour to be ringing at people's doors."

"Ah, don't make me weep! It is for poor mamma, and for Damiano."

"Go away, I tell you! Father Apollinaris is not in; this is a forbidden hour, and you can't see anybody."

At this moment the young priest, his attention distracted by the altercation from the book in which he had lost himself, recognized the voice of his sister and rushed into the other room.

"My dear Stella!" he cried. "Is it you? Why do you come here, all alone?"

He had not finished speaking, and the weeping girl was advancing toward him, when, at the threshold of the open door, in the uncertain twilight, appeared the black figure and inquisitorial face of Father Apollinaris.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PETITIONS AND PROMISES

AT the sudden appearance of Father Apollinaris, words froze on the lips of the trembling girl, the old woman's face cleared, and Celso, cowed by that familiar look of austerity, drew back a step. Even in the confusion of the moment he did not forget to pocket the volume of Pascal, which he still held in his hands.

The father, who had certainly recognized the girl and probably guessed—in part, at least—what she had come for, advanced slowly and with composure, and, making Celso understand by a nod that he expected him in the parlor, he preceded him thither. The old woman, between suspicion and impatience, had held herself on her heels waiting in the hope that the first words which fell from the father's lips might throw some light upon the matter, or at least give her a chance to put an evil construction on it.

Meanwhile Stella, as if revived by the very agony which oppressed her heart, ran quickly to Celso.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "you don't know why I come here. Our Damiano"—

"Damiano? But what has happened?" And Celso grew pale.

"Oh, my God! I haven't the heart to tell you . . . But it's true! Yesterday, late at night, they seized him, they took him to prison."

"Poor mamma! poor souls that we all are!" exclaimed the young priest; and then, lowering his voice, "But how? But why?"

"God only knows!"

"But what has he done?"

"As to me, I know he has done nothing wrong."

Hardly had these rapid, sorrowful words been spoken when the door of the parlor was opened by Dorothea, and the father's voice could be heard: "Don Celso, come in! And let the girl come in also."

Without a word, the broken-hearted brother and sister obeyed. The youth leaned against the desk, behind which sat the father in the great armchair, his arms crossed, his brows clouded with thoughts, his eyes interrogative. But the girl had hardly stepped in the room when she halted, awestruck, between the door and the window. She dared not raise her eyes, and she did not know why her heart trembled more than ever.

"What did you come to my house for?" The father turned to the girl and asked this question in anything but a reassuring voice.

Stella did not answer. She did not even dare to raise her eyes from the ground.

"A great misfortune"—began Celso, seeing her timid confusion.

"Suppose that I know all"—with a still severer tone the father addressed his young acolyte—"suppose that I know that your brother Damiano, who for some time has led an evil life, is beginning to reap what he has sown."

"Ah, no! no! Do not believe it!" The words broke impetuously from poor Stella, who loved her Damiano too much to keep silent when she heard him thus maligned in the hour of affliction.

"How, father? You then know?"—interrupted Celso.

"I know what is," answered the ex-friar, in the same severe and monotonous tone.

"It is a crime—it is an injustice they have done him, do you know that?" cried Stella, defying with innocent frankness that impassive gaze. Then she added: "But how did you come to know it, when it happened less than twenty-four hours ago?"

"I know all, I repeat. It is only a short time ago that your mother spoke with the reverend rector of San Calimero, is not that true? On the other hand, there are things which only too often may be predicted long before they happen."

"Then if you know all," the acolyte gathered courage to say, "for pity's sake, father, free us from this suspense; we can assure you that our brother is innocent."

"Don't run on in that fashion," replied the father phlegmatically, "there are things, it is true, which concern your attitude toward our times."

"But he is our brother!" the girl could not help repeating.

"A little more respect, young woman! Let me speak, and be assured that I can do you good. As to you, Don Celso, you know, and it is not for me to remind you of it, what I have already done for you. At the death of your father, who, indeed, at that wretched time thought little and to little purpose of his children, I received you into my house to encourage the good inclinations toward which your own instincts and the devotion of your mother were directing you. I made you study. I rescued you from the influence of the pseudo-philosophy of our age; and, as you have a docile heart, I was able to conceive the best hopes for you."

"But I tremble already. I think"—

"Peace, boy, peace! Equanimity and submission—those are the virtues necessary to obtain the grace of total detachment from the affections and the things of this earth."

"And my poor family, which is suffering? And my mother?"

"Peace, I say! You agitate yourself and tremble, like a man who is a slave of passion and of sin. Compose yourself a little and let us reason quietly of things."

"It is impossible! I must see my mother. In a moment like this she has need of me. Who will speak to her, who will offer her a word of consolation? And then—Damiano, who will help him? Who will lift a finger for him?"

As he spoke thus, with all the warmth of an affectionate heart, Celso drew closer to his sister, and she, whose agony had been increased by the icy words she had heard, turned quickly toward him.

"Yes," she said, "we wish to go to our mother!"

"*We* wish?" The father shook his head slightly, then smiled half bitterly, half scornfully, and continued in the same inexorable tone: "Leave the matter with those whom it concerns; we will remedy the evil as far as possible, provided that your mind will accommodate

itself to the proper remedies. It is well, Celso, that for the present you should renounce your wish to see your mother. It is already night; I cannot allow you to go out. It would not be decent or seemly for you to be seen in the streets at this late hour with a young girl, even if she is your sister."

The youth, long accustomed to the blindest and most timid obedience, did not know what to answer; good and affectionate as he was, his will always ended by yielding to the father's inflexible authority, from which he had never ventured to break away. In the past he had often experienced a certain gentle joy in the humble sacrifice of self; but that evening, when his affection asserted itself more strongly, more ardently, he knew not how to resign himself.

He sought for some other reason that he might urge, when Dorothea, who had held herself apart during this colloquy, and appeared to be overjoyed at the turn which the affair had taken, if for no other reason than a secret dislike for the timid youth, now came forward, and placing herself between the brother and sister assumed an air of hypocritical sorrow.

"I beg pardon," she said, "if I put in a word. Certainly, as his lordship says, it would not be right that we should forget decency and decorum, and for that reason this young girl should now be in her own home, if she prizes her reputation as an honest maid."

"That also is true," resumed the ex-friar, "therefore, Don Celso, have patience, your sister must return home without losing any time. But, thinking over the matter, I deem it best that she should not go alone, and that Dorothea should accompany her."

"I? But why? Do you think"—

"Would you have any difficulty? A woman like you?"

"A woman like me? What is your lordship thinking of? How could I return all alone, walk the city at night, in the hour of greatest danger; compromise my charac-

ter, my modesty? I tell the truth when I say that your lordship, in all these thirty years, never has asked me to do a thing of this sort."

Nothing was further from Celso's mood than laughter. Indeed, this sudden ferocity on the part of the old woman made him feel almost worse than he had felt under the icy observations of his superior. Luckily, Stella was equal to the occasion. Her innocent courage asserted itself.

"It is true," she said, "that it is now night, and that mamma expects me. I beg pardon if my coming has disturbed you. Celso, I will pray to God for Damiano and for us all. He who is above will not abandon us."

Without further parley, she walked out of the parlor, and turned her back on the house from which she almost had been driven with apathetic indifference by a man who, in the sacred character he assumed, should rather have pitied and consoled her.

Father Apollinaris and the youth remained alone. Dorothea, who had gone to close the door behind the girl, was sufficiently satisfied with the way things had gone. She lighted her master's student lamp, and having placed it on the desk, went downstairs into the kitchen, where she resumed her work of hulling melon-seeds.

The ex-friar remained silent. Celso, perturbed by a thousand thoughts, would have been glad to ask him something more definite about Damiano, but did not dare.

Perhaps the father guessed the secret anguish, but he made no sign of comprehending. He drew forth several letters, read and re-read them, set to writing slowly, then blotted, folded and sealed the paper and laid it away in a drawer of the desk.

Half an hour passed away. Celso, though anxious and grieved, had not known how to conceive an angry or bitter thought against him whom he still regarded as

his benefactor. At last, the father lifted his head, and as if he had just become conscious of the boy's presence, he cried:

"What, you are still here? Perhaps you wish to say something to me?"

"Could I go now with this agony in my heart?" he hesitated. "I have seen my sister weeping; I cannot run to my mother! and as to poor Damiano"—

"Go on!"

"As to him, I know nothing as yet. Oh, God help me!"

"Have I not told you enough?" replied the father, knitting his brows and resuming his severe tone. "Very well, then, listen to me. Not for nothing have I sought to detach you from the pernicious influence, I will not say of your family, but of your brother. I knew some time ago that he had begun badly, and in fact it was not long before he was harboring prejudices against honest people and provoking the attention of the authorities. Although he had not given them any serious reasons for censure, he was recognized as hotheaded and turbulent. Recently, in the factory where he is employed, he began to enter in league with artisans, younger and more desperate than he, made himself their leader and spent riotous hours with them in the suburban taverns. To say all at once, last evening, finding himself in the company of many other madcaps, in one of those places open for revelry and evil deeds, he engaged in a quarrel with other unfortunates of his own stripe, passed from words to blows, and, caught *in flagrante*, was arrested."

What Celso felt when these implacable words seared his heart can hardly be imagined. His memories, his affection, impelled him to doubt their truth, but he could not imagine how or why the father should cherish rancor against his unfortunate brother.

"Such is the fruit of insubordination and independence, of these mad morals of the century!"

This brief, angry conclusion which Father Apollinaris pronounced, after a pause, with ferocious intensity, agitated Celso so that he could utter no word or prayer. Hardly able to stand, he let himself fall on the nearest chair, and if the dim light of the lamp had reached the corner in which he was, the father would have seen tears roll down his cheeks.

A little later, not hearing the boy breathe, he turned to him again, but spoke now with a gentler voice.

"I do not wish to inflict too much pain upon you by what I have said. I only intended to show you that we must not trust in ourselves, in the perfidious illusions of the intellect, nor in the pride of the world. Harken to those who have assumed the serious charge of conducting us, illuminating us, teaching us to think, to feel, and to live. That is what you must persuade yourself to do in future; your studies, your present life, and the future to which you are consecrated put a heavy responsibility upon you. Die to the world, die to the will, and then await the reward of submission and perseverance."

With this admonition, which, to say truth, was one that the father was accustomed to bestow on the youth, he hoped to bind and compress that soul, which yearned for pure affection and for lofty truth. But an arid sentiment is not the word of faith, and a rigid severity is not the word of hope and love.

"Let us leave all this aside," resumed the ex-friar; "it is not of you we must speak, but of your family. In the first place, I must confess that I pity the grief in which I see your sister is plunged. Tell me what are her inclinations, her morals?"

"Oh, she is an angel of goodness."

"An angel? Take care what you say! Beware of such blasphemous comparisons, which are only too common in these days."

"I meant to say that there are very few like her, so

good, so sensible. She is like my mother, industrious and honest. Oh, if you only knew with what truly Christian virtue and courage they have sustained grief, poverty, and persecution!"

His cheeks reddened as he said this. He was visibly affected. With a frown his superior interrupted him:

"What do you mean by that?"

"I am sure that no faith and no virtue is acceptable to God if the virtue of these good people is not accepted."

"Faith? Virtue? Christian courage? Where have you learned this thoroughly worldly confidence, this blind presumption? I, look you, I, with a single word could give the lie to everything you have so explicitly asserted. But even this I will let pass, because of the agitation in which I see you. Once more I pray you to calm yourself and give heed to what little more I have to say to you."

"Speak, father, speak, and pardon me."

"I will tell you, then, that I have a plan to rescue your sister, through the assistance of pious and respectable persons, from the dangers which environ her. Indeed, a little while ago I spoke about the matter, but now I will make it an absolute duty, now there is not a moment to lose. I am certain that in some pious household, in some retreat, which prudent charity opens even in this city to imperiled virtue, she might hope to be received. Nevertheless, I fear—I confess it—I fear her refusal, her obstinacy."

"And so," said Celso with a sigh, "our mother would have to remain all alone, in days like these?"

"One might think also of her."

"But if Stella"—

"That girl is walking on the edge of a precipice, I tell you this, and it is for you to save her."

"For me? How?"

"Let that suffice for the time being. You know enough, you will think on the matter, and to-morrow

we will decide what is best to be done. You may be the instrument with which heaven wishes to speed a good work. Now withdraw in peace, and to-morrow you will thank me for what I purpose doing for your family and for yourself."

Rising from his seat he dismissed the youth with a grave gesture; and the latter, confused and silent, ascended to his cold room. The father then passed into the dining-room, where Dorothea had prepared his usual supper, and sat down to put to the test the powers of his digestion.

CHAPTER XXIX

ST. CHRISTOPHER'S DAY

LOVE and Hate are truly the Ormuzd and the Ahriman that rule humanity. In the never-ending strife between them they involve equally the oppressor and the oppressed, disturb the dreams of great and small, and drop balm or venom into the life of the obscurest and poorest of men. Love and Hate never forget, and in the contrast between them we recognize the sad truth that evil never dies upon earth.

Before Damiano, at that time, stretched a beautiful vision of the future, like a sky without a cloud. Content with his obscure and honest lot, he no longer dwelt on the agonies he had suffered, on the hopes of a past still dear to him, which yet were the occasion for disillusion and despair. Now his only wish was to smooth the days that still remained to his mother, surrounding her with every care, and procuring for her and for Stella, whenever he could, the small comforts that give ease and happiness to those who have long breathed the air of poverty. The habit of hard work and of simple wants had

enabled him to lay aside a few hundred lire, which he had entrusted to the care of old Signor Lorenzo, his loyal confidant and friend. From these resources he was occasionally able to make a little present to Stella and his mother, and he found happiness in their joy and surprise.

When his chief gave him permission, Damiano, with one or two of his artisan friends, would seek recreation outside the walls of the city, walking for many miles, discussing whatever matters came up, only too glad if, among these youths of his own age, his brethren of toil, he found any who responded to the ideas, not entirely clear indeed, but those that he cherished in his own mind.

Sometimes, when he was alone, his steps led him to Lorenzo's humble room. And the old soldier, who, with the return of fine weather felt his health also return would greet him effusively and beg to be allowed to accompany him on his walks.

Stopping by the wayside and leaning on his stick, the veteran would even now talk of the days of the great Napoleon with the son of his old companion in arms. Then he seemed to become again what he had been thirty years before, the fiery Jacobin, the patriot soldier. When the fifth of May came round, which was the anniversary also of the death of Victor, he would walk silently as far as the cemetery of Gentilino. On that day he tied in the buttonhole of his old cloak a new ribbon of velvet and orange. He spoke not a syllable along the way, but he held his eyes down, and carried his stick under his arm. And Damiano, through the corner of his eye seeing a tear fall from the veteran's cheek upon the cross which bore the obscure name of a hero, would feel a great compassion stir his own soul.

Thus our Damiano passed his busy and blameless life. Freed from all further fear for his sister after that last and sufficiently explicit explanation with Omobono, the youth, as happens to all in the days of their prosperity,

planned the most delightful projects for the future, and felt no dread of any approaching tempest.

It was a Sunday in July, not more than a week after his encounter with his enemy. He had planned a little outing with Lorenzo and one of his fellow-artisans, a young man who had become very friendly with him. He and they were to lunch together outside the Ticinese gate. At that place, which Lorenzo obstinately insisted on calling the Marengo gate, following the shores of the Naviglio Grande, and that long coast-line bordered with houses and sheds, may be seen, in the midst of a picturesque group of houses called the Cascina Campagnuola ("the rural dairy") the ancient church of St. Christopher. It was built at the end of the fourteenth century from the votive offerings of the good citizens of Milan after a great pestilence. Ever since then, on the last Sunday in June of every year, it has been the custom of the lively people, who are devoted to their festivals and holidays, to come to venerate the holy giant, and to finish the day in the nearby hostelry of the Samaritana, nearly as old as the church itself, and in the roads and meadows which surround it. It is one of the few popular festivals that have survived from ancient times. On that day one may study and understand the people of old Milan as they really are, with their noisy hilarity, their frank and hearty good nature, which as a rule envies no one, which knows how to profit by a good dinner, which sings and takes no thought of the morrow, and is always content and always the same.

The church stands in the midst of a little green meadow, shaded by large trees, from amid which rises the pointed Gothic campanile. On its double façade, between the arches and the pilasters, one can still guess at the remains of old paintings, and the red cross in a white field of our ancient republic, the heraldic snake of the Visconti, and another device which is held to be the arms of the Abbot of San Vincenzo in Prato. At the side of

the main door still stands, though sadly decayed and half covered with plaster of recent date, the huge figure of St. Christopher, with the Child on one shoulder and the traveler's bundle on the other.

On that day the two streets running along the canal, from the Ticinese gate to the Cascina, swarmed with a confused multitude which came and went in pairs, in families, in troops. On the canal also came and went a number of boats, drawn by starveling horses overburdened by their human cargo, which now and then was threatened with a cold bath. The holiday-seekers that were returning by water sang with full-throated cheerfulness, and emitted shrill screams, which expressed only too earnestly the joy of the expiring holiday. The passengers on both banks responded to songs and screams, and exchanged jests and courtesies as signs of recognition and salutation. Men, women, and children called one another by name from here, there and everywhere, and the young men hailed one another with such sonorous demonstrations of brotherly feeling that they made girls shriek and lovers curse; every carriage and wagon was the signal for a new round of greetings, a repetition of the songs and of the mad triumphal shouts.

In the little hostelry itself was a confusion, a turmoil, a chattering which might have made it a fit habitation for the devil. The kitchen, the ground floor and the second story were crowded. At the center and the side-tables, sitting on unstable chairs and benches, drinking, carousing and shouting, were joyous groups of friends, acquaintances and companions, all artists, shopkeepers, waiters, porters, the most numerous and the least fortunate part of the populace, who for the most part find no other relief from their six days of hard labor than to forget the seventh amid flasks and bottles, far from their wives, their children, and the elders of their family.

In the garden of the hostelry, at a small table, some distance from the main scene of carousal sat Lorenzo,

Damiano, and Giovanni. The latter was a lively companion from the factory who had come with them. Between them the three had demolished a small roast chicken and a bottle of white wine. They were talking quietly together, without paying any heed to the shouts and gambols of the crowd, some of whom were plainly intoxicated, and were walking unsteadily around in a vain search for the gates of the garden.

Signor Lorenzo was in fine fettle that day. He was in his element in the midst of this popular turmoil, and he began to speak, with more than usual fire and frankness, of his pet ideas. Damiano, however, who also had until then been gayer than usual, did not laugh any more, but sat, silent and pensive, looking at the old soldier, while Giovanni emitted under his breath some new song taught him by his sweetheart.

Damiano had not laughed since he had laid eyes on the ugly figure of a lame beggar at the opposite corner of the table where he was sitting with his friends. This man, limping nimbly on his crutch, had followed them hither, always keeping just behind them, and under pretense of inability to find any other place, had planted himself at their table. Then, ordering the best wine, he had poured out glass after glass, eyeing Damiano obliquely the while, with a sly smile and an insulting air.

A little later two other persons approached, who first exchanged a few whispered words with each other, and then glanced at the beggar, who drew closer to Damiano in order to make room for the newcomers.

Among the people crowded in the hostelry, immediately behind a large window in the kitchen, was stationed a man who evidently wished above all things to avoid notice, yet who followed, with impatience in his eyes and in his motions, the scene in that corner of the garden. And, in fact, from that point he could see enough, for the hedge of thorns which separated the kitchen-yard

from the garden was broken and leafless in more than one place.

"Listen, my young friends," exclaimed the worthy veteran in a loud voice. "If all who are here had heads and hearts like you two—who, to explain, resemble what we were, your father and I, Damiano, in our halcyon days—oh! then we might be able to do something better than to empty flasks or sing vespers to the honor and glory of the saint of travelers."

"Don't speak so loud, Signor Lorenzo!" interrupted Damiano, "because in public you can never tell what brood of knaves may surround us."

"Eh, what does it matter to me? As to me, what I have in my heart is on my tongue; I always speak my real thought in the face of everybody. And I don't know why"—

"Bravo, Signor Lorenzo!" applauded the vivacious Giovanni, "that is what all ought to do!"

"I know what I am saying," Damiano persisted.

"You are a good boy, or rather you are a man," said the veteran. "But you have not seen what I have seen. And as men, at certain times, are like sheep, you imitate the others, too, and have not the courage to say aloud what you think. I know well that there are everywhere traitors, renegades and worse. Have I not seen everything go to the dogs by reason of those cursed fools who have given drink to the poor?"

"Nevertheless," Damiano could not help saying, "it is better to do than to talk."

"Oh, yes, heaven bless you," returned the old man, "that is indeed the first law. But who would slip away, or sit still hatching eggs, as we say, when somebody hits him a slap in the face? What would you have him do? That man who made the world dance upon his fingers only wished to know one thing—*Forward!* I have heard him a hundred times crying 'Forward! my Italians!' And we—we will go forward, that is what must be, and

Europe will be ours. But look you, when he walked with us, who knew his road, he did what it was his to do; afterward, when he too willed to set himself on a throne, and come in contact with fools, then farewell to the good times! That was indeed the way of it!"

"Dear Signor Lorenzo, you are right, but for heaven's sake, don't say any more," Damiano still insisted.

"And why not?"

"There are people who seek quarrels."

"Very good; who seeks, finds. Do you think that I am afraid of anybody?"

"And we too," said Giovanni, "we are here to give a good money's worth to anyone who wants it, to every one his own."

"Yes," cried Lorenzo, "To every one his own! You, good people, content yourself with bread and priests, and you come here to make merry, without thinking of yesterday or of to-morrow; and you don't know, you don't even think, what poor devils may do, and if there is a renegade who curses you in the name of his own impostures, you tremble! You do not know how to plunge this in the heart of a spy."

And, so saying, the audacious old man, seizing a knife which was ready to hand sent the blade quivering into the wormeaten boards of the table.

At that moment the beggar, who had held his ear attentive, and had lost no word of the dialogue, rising suddenly, rushed between Damiano and the old soldier, and hammering with his crutch upon the table, shouted: "Who is the scoundrel that insults decent people with the name of spy!"

With him up jumped the other two, who until then had occupied themselves only in drinking and casting surly looks at their neighbors, without saying a word. Hardly had Damiano seen the beggar rise and come toward him with an air of insult and bravado when he understood that it was all a concocted plot, and that

those ugly-visaged men wished at all hazards to provoke a quarrel. He could understand nothing more, for he could not remember ever having met any of them.

The first that came forward had an olive-colored face and gray moustaches, and he darted fire and fury out of the one eye that was left him. He was armed with a big stick. Pulling his hat down over his head, he almost touched Damiano's face with the stick. Meanwhile his companion, who seemed to be a porter dressed up for a holiday, gripped the arm of Giovanni, who turned to see what was the matter.

One of these, as the reader may have guessed, was Martigny, the master of fence, who, well used to quarrels and impostures, had taken it upon himself to champion the Illustrissimo, and also the Cavaliere Lodovico against Damiano. His companion was a hired bravo, whom Signor Omobono had sent on his own account.

And the latter also, so highly did he value his revenge, had without anyone's knowledge come also to the festival. The man who at a window in the kitchen was straining his eyes to see how the affair would turn out, was he.

CHAPTER XXX

CAUGHT IN A TRAP

LORENZO and Giovanni leaped simultaneously to their feet, stupefied at the insult. Even Damiano rose and, turning to the quarrelsome unknown, said to him, with ill-concealed wrath and amazement:

"Step aside with me, Signor, if you have anything to say to me. Speak! I am here to answer you."

"Body of the devil! I don't have to say"—began the other, raising his voice and grasping his stick.

"You need not raise your voice," interrupted Damiano; "if you need to learn how to behave, I am here."

"It was that old scoundrel who insulted me," and the stranger raised his stick against Lorenzo, who still stood dumb with amazement, knowing not whom to turn against of the three who stood around him with their fists clenched and uttering curses.

"Let that man alone," said Damiano. "I am here. I will teach you, if you don't"—

"Honest men cannot be insulted in this way."

"And who said a word to you?"

"That old man with you called one of us a spy, and raised his knife."

"Nonsense, it wasn't meant for you."

"I saw him and I heard him, I tell you, and I am not used to that sort of insult."

"It was you that were insulting," persisted the youth, controlling himself with difficulty. "Yes, you! You placed yourself in front of me with an air of insupportable insolence. Now you can go."

Hoping to put an end to the controversy, he withdrew toward the entrance to the garden. Meanwhile the throng, attracted by the noise and hoping to see a fight, crowded around the gate.

"Go yourself! We are decent people."

"And what are we?"

"You are ruffians, and I will teach you a lesson. I will teach you, if you don't"—

"This evening—to-morrow—when and where you please, but not here. Don't make a scene here, or I may lose patience."

"To-morrow? Patience? Respect the rights of citizens, and you will have no trouble."

With this, the insolent Martigny seized Damiano by the coat, and tried to pull him forward.

The youth whose blood was now boiling, sought no further parley. Finding it impossible to evade this man,

who seemed to have pledged himself to a fight, he determined to make an end of it. He struck his fist so violently in the breast of the master of fence that he made him turn a somersault over the seat. His hat dropped from his head, and flasks and glasses crashed down from the table to the ground.

"Give it to him!" "Hit him again!" "Bravo!" shouted the crowd, encircling the belligerents.

Meanwhile, Lorenzo and Giovanni, whom the intruding crowd had divided from Damiano, were exchanging oaths and curses with the two companions of Martigny.

The beggar, twirling his crutch around his head, swore that he would break the bones of the old scoundrel who had no respect for honest men; Giovanni tried to thrust him aside, while the veteran, hardly knowing where he was, exclaimed with fury:

"Poor imbeciles! who don't even understand what you are. I, old as I am, have a mind to drive you all away! Remember that I am an old blade, rusty, perhaps, but still whole. Back, I tell you! Let me pass! I am looking for the others. Where are my companions? Here, Giovanni, Damiano!"

And he made as if to break through the crowd which surrounded him and shut him in.

"Ah, the old madman!" "Away with you!" "What's the matter?" "A spy!" "Hit him!" "Let poor people alone!" "Down with the old man!" "Give it to the spy!" "Give it to him!"

So they shouted here, there, everywhere, without knowing what was happening, without seeking a wherefore. They had drunk freely, and they wanted to shout, to forget the heat, to make a noise, to use their fists. But the unfortunate master of fence, fallen at Damiano's first onslaught, and jeered at by the bystanders, wished to return the blow. Rising, he rushed furiously at the youth, to break his loaded stick on his skull, and shouted:

"Take that, assassin!"

And the blow might have been mortal, but just at that moment a large, bearded youth who had recognized Damiano, and could not believe that he was in the wrong, rushed between the combatants in time to arrest in mid-air the stick of the enraged bully. A shout of applause resounded from every side, so greatly did that sudden exhibition of strength and dexterity please and astonish the crowd. This young protector, arrived at so opportune a moment, was Bernardone, that former schoolfellow of Damiano, who had not seen him for a long time, but who was always to be found wherever there was feasting and revelry, the sworn friend of wine, of gayety, of pretty girls, and of poor people.

That feat of Bernardone, and the laughter and applause with which it was greeted, put the culminating touch to Martigny's anger. Feeling himself between two fires, seeing matters take this ugly turn, he cursed the hour that he had set himself this unfortunate task. But he would not leave the field until he had laid low one or the other of his antagonists. Raining blows right and left in a mad fury, he succeeded at last in cleaving his way through the crowd that had held him fast. Neither Damiano nor Bernardone, though they were unarmed, had any intention of retreating. Seeing this blind fury, they turned round and in a moment were at his shoulders.

"Hold fast, Damiano!" cried Bernardone, "I want a chance to get in a good one on that forbidding face."

"He is crazy," said Damiano, "let us leave him alone!"

"No, by Diana and Bacchus! When old folk turn their back upon us, it is for young folk to let them see how to behave in this world."

"Eh, that is not the man who first abused me, but that other one among that group of people."

It was the good Lorenzo who added this. Closely surrounded by a number of drunken idlers, assisted vainly by the robust lungs and the agile fists of Giovanni, he

was still seeking for an explanation and for a way through that ribald crowd, who had sworn to make him responsible for everything.

When Martigny saw himself alone against two, and felt that his blows were only sawing the air, more wary than before, he turned back, and, hoping to find somebody to take his part, cried out:

"Scoundrels, who attack an honest man two to one! Is there no one who will lend the hand of an honest citizen against thieves and assassins?"

"Yes, by heaven, one against two is an infamy!" cried one in the crowd.

"Let them alone! Why do you bother about them?"

"No, no, separate them! Here! throw down the stick!"

"Hurrah!" "Charge again!" "Give it to the old one! he is a spy!"

Damiano saw no opportunity to get away, to lose himself in the crowd, so as not to make matters worse; and, cursing himself for ever having thought of coming out here, he was on the way to lose the coolness which had stood him in good stead until now. But all eyes were upon him, and the spectators so flocked around him that all retreat was cut off. As to Bernardone, he was eager to break the big stick across the shoulders of its possessor. He saw it waving in the air, once he had felt it grazing his arm; in self-defense he seized a small bench and was furiously pressing toward the fencing-master, while the latter, tired, spent with rage and fatigue as a result of his unequal struggle, now sought to beat a retreat, and looked around with fearful eyes for his companions. "Here, Michelaccio!" he howled, on catching sight of the porter, not far away. The latter was vainly endeavoring to shake himself free from Giovanni's hands, which clung to him like tentacles. Lorenzo, meanwhile, had succeeded in saving his old head from the beggar's crutch, and the beggar himself, whirled away by the crowd which came and went in the

narrow garden of the hostelry, found himself in a twinkling out of the mêlée.

Michelaccio, at his comrade's call, made a supreme effort, tore himself from Giovanni, and thrusting aside all who stood in his way, leaped to Martigny's side.

"Where is he?" cried the latter, grown bolder. "Where is the rascal that insulted me?"

"Is it you who seek bread for your teeth, you gray-skinned ape?" answered Bernardone, planting his fist in Martigny's face.

"Come!" cried Damiano in his turn, "keep your hands to yourself, throw down your stick, and if you want satisfaction I will give it to you any time you name."

"Satisfaction!" snarled Martigny, "you are two to one, you infamous curs! I am a man of honor."

"Honor!" interrupted Damiano. "You indulge in public in the insults of a blackguard; and if you wish"—

"We will cast them back in your teeth," added Bernardone, with a menacing gesture.

"You are drunk, and you are both vile rascals!" shrieked the other.

"Now put an end to this! Let's get out of here," said Damiano.

"I want satisfaction—immediately."

"Out of here, I tell you! don't tempt me any more."

"No, I'm going to show you, *canaille!*"

"Go back! No? Then look out for yourself."

At that moment Martigny, furiously brandishing his stick, with treacherous intent sought to bring it down on Damiano's skull. The boy lost his wits, and, finding his fingers close over the knife, which Lorenzo had stuck into the table, he pulled it out, and dashed against his ribald assailant. A cry of horror issued from the crowd, and Martigny, seeing the knife in the hands of his adversary, fell back in affright, shouting:

"Arrest the assassin!"

All this scene, which lasted only a few minutes, was

witnessed anxiously from afar by three persons, who, although they seemed in no wise implicated, really looked on the issue of this ugly episode as of the utmost importance. One of them, Signor Omobono, from the kitchen window could command an easy view of the garden. Behind his shoulders appeared two strange faces, one was that of an ugly old woman with a shabby straw hat, and dressed in a gown of faded taffeta, and the other a man with a long, thin countenance, a pair of green spectacles under a large triangular hat.

Why these people—whom it cannot be difficult to recognize as the old huckster, Emerenziana and the spectral Don Aquilino, chaplain to the Illustrissimo—should have come with Signor Omobono, and in the same carriage that drew him to that popular festival, we cannot say. But one may be permitted to suppose that in that moment both experienced nearly the same sentiments as were felt by Omobono, for they looked askance at each other, one biting her lips and the other shaking his head. Moreover, the irascible huckster, who had borne a grudge against Damiano from the time that he had put a stop to her visits in his home, could not keep quiet, and let out continuous exclamations of dismay, as:—

“How imprudent! . . . And what are they doing now? . . . That will spoil everything! . . . Bravo! . . . Dogs!”

The chaplain, on the other hand, showed by certain gestures of alarm and suspicion that he had been dragged into the plot against his better judgment, and had consented only in deference to a will that was more terrible to him than a command.

But Signor Omobono, seeing how the fencer was getting the worst of it, was intent on finding some means of turning defeat into victory. As soon as he heard that cry of “Arrest the assassin!” he took it up. “Arrest him! Arrest him!” he shouted in a voice loud enough to split his throat. “Police! Police!”

This cry for the police was like a magician’s wand,

and in a twinkling changed the entire aspect of things. The combatants stayed their hands. Two gendarmes at the head of a few soldiers, by using the energetic persuasion of the butt-end of their muskets, cleared a passage through that thick wall of idlers and drunkards, and found themselves in the center of the garden, where the crowd of spectators had impeded the progress of the fight.

Signor Omobono had seen the old patriot pass along the highway before he uttered his appeal, and now rushed out himself, and, avoiding all risks, put himself behind the soldiers, whom he followed to the field of conflict. Just as one of the gendarmes, seeing a knife glittering in Damiano's hand, reached out to take it from him, the evil genius of Omobono impelled him to come forward as a peace-maker, so that his revenge might be completer, and that at the same time he might gain from that crowd the reputation of being a person of importance and good sense. He slid between Giovanni and Lorenzo. The latter, paying little heed to the arrival of the police, were loudly airing their grievances against that scoundrelly master of fence. Assuming an air of authority, Omobono poured out reproofs and threats.

"Keep off! keep off, I tell you! Is this the way you respect the laws? What people! It's a shame! Go home! go home!"

Damiano, although detached from this group, saw and recognized Signor Omobono. At once the mystery became clear to him. He knew that the villains who had been seeking to injure him must have been hired by Omobono, or his powerful patron. He lifted up eyes of despair to heaven, and, striking his forehead with his hand, unconsciously let fall the knife which a little while ago he had raised in the air.

One of the gendarmes picked it up from the ground. The other with the aid of two soldiers, arrested, one after the other, Damiano, the swearing Martigny, and

old Lorenzo, who was still trying to make himself heard, but who had not breath left for a word more. Bernardone, Giovanni, and the beggar escaped in the confusion.

Damiano, humiliated and aggrieved to the bottom of his heart, did not wish to be dragged by the soldiers through the curious crowd, but in vain did he give his name and promise to present himself at once before the authorities. They turned a deaf ear and hustled him along with the others.

Omobono continued in his role of peacemaker. With gestures of horror, he had been retailing his story of the episode. Now, eager to expedite Damiano's discomfiture, he generously offered the use of the carriage he had hired, which was awaiting him a few steps from the tavern. The gendarmes did not say him nay, and Signor Omobono cried out "Here!" to the coachman, who, half tipsy, was swaying on his box. The soldiers ordered their prisoners into the carriage. Damiano, only too anxious to get out of sight, did not need a second bidding. Lorenzo, though the injustice seared his soul, allowed himself to be persuaded. But Martigny would not listen to reason. He struggled and shouted, and was with difficulty overpowered by the soldiers and thrust into the carriage.

Signor Omobono, who kept the door open, was secretly brimming over with joy at seeing his enemies going straight to prison. He had hardly dared to hope for so much. Just then two soldiers gave him a mighty push from behind, to shove him into the carriage with the others. In vain he scolded, stormed and cursed, to make them understand that he was not one of the prisoners, that he was merely a peacemaker who knew nothing about the affair. They would not listen to his arguments. When he turned round and tried to put his foot on the carriage steps, one of the soldiers seized his arm with strength enough to dislocate it at the shoulder;

another assisted him with a violent shove, and, as he fell back upon the seat in front of Martigny, they closed the door upon him. The baffled peacemaker rose again and yelled; he asserted his innocence, he demanded to be let out, he declared that he was a personage of consideration who could give an account of himself. The mob howled derision at him. The coachman, at a sign from the gendarmes, who had climbed up on the box beside him, whipped up his two horses, which, with unaccustomed speed, made their way to the city amid the noisy and giddy crowd, which was returning from the festival of St. Christopher.

CHAPTER XXXI

A PIOUS PLOT

THE sun was beginning to withdraw its rays from their windows, when Stella and her mother, whom Damiano had left at home, gazed out upon the street to see whether he were returning. As it was Sunday, and air and sky were serene and beautiful, the girl felt a desire to go out for a walk with her brother, as was not unusual, in those fleeting hours of freedom. But knowing that he had gone out, in company with Signor Lorenzo, she had little hope of his returning before evening.

One thought chased another as she sat envying the passers-by below. By and by she noticed a man running at full speed in her direction, with his eyes upon her window. She thought she remembered him. And, in fact, he turned into the entrance to their house. This confirmed her in the belief that she knew him, but she could not place him. Why did a thousand dark and confused thoughts cross her mind in the short time it took him to mount the steps and arrive at their door?

"Mamma," cried Stella at hearing the step outside, and she turned white.

"What's the matter? Why do you look at me in that way?"

"Oh, mamma! I fear some evil has happened!"

"Dear God! what a thought!"

"Oh, I pray nothing has happened to our Damiano!"

A violent knock was heard at the door. Stella, before running to open it, turned to her mother and said, "It is Giovanni, one of Damiano's friends. I am certain that something is the matter."

The boy entered, confused and still burning with anger at what had occurred. In the presence of the women he paused and knew not what to say.

"Speak, for the love of heaven! What has happened? Damiano—where is he?"

"Oh, Signorina Stella," stammered the boy, seeking in vain for the courage which a little while ago had enabled him to face three bullies at the inn, "Signora Teresa, Damiano went with me"—

"Yes, yes! But where is he now?"

"Has anything happened to him?" added the mother, "tell us, in the name of charity."

"Here's what happened"—and Giovanni appeared to be seeking for words as he nervously buttoned and unbuttoned his fustian doublet. "Damiano and I—but there was also with us that fine man, Signor Lorenzo. Just think of it, a man like that, a cavaliere!—enough! I must tell you that there was a row—a devilish affair. Whatever they may say, blood is not bean-soup, and an honest man, when he is pulled by the hair"—

Neither of his auditors, anxious and alarmed as they were, could understand a word of all this, but Stella guessed that a quarrel had occurred.

"How is it possible," she asked, "that Damiano should have let himself be insulted? But go on, tell the truth, if there was a fight, what happened?"

"Oh, holy heaven! And was he wounded? Speak!"

"No, no, don't alarm yourself, Signora Teresa, nothing of the kind. No one has hurt him; neither he nor I would allow ourselves to be beaten, you may be sure. But—I don't know how it happened—that scoundrel of a foreigner had a quarrel with him—but I swear there is some deviltry behind it all!"

"And he?"

"Oh, quick, tell us!"

"Why, he saw that this ruffian intended to knock him down, and he defended himself, while I had to square accounts with a companion of the foreigner. And in the midst of it all in comes the police. I, by a miracle, succeeded in losing myself in the crowd, but the others, rascals and honest men together, were caught in the act and arrested."

"And Damiano?"

"What do you expect? He was arrested also, but don't alarm yourself; to-night or to-morrow morning he will be back here; it is as certain as that two and two make four—a youth such as he! Imagine it!"

"And Signor Lorenzo?"

"Why, didn't I tell you? A man like that, too! They took him away as if he were a rascal. Oh, I am not acquainted with myself, if I don't make them pay for this, all three of those hounds. I don't know what I wouldn't give to make an end of them!"

"Oh, but in the meantime he is in there, he is in prison! Poor Damiano! Unfortunate that we all are!"

The young girl, allowing her mind to run on to other possible terrors, and other persecutions, bethought herself that perhaps Giovanni had not told them the whole truth, and she questioned him anew, with an ever increasing anxiety. But the mother, stunned and speechless, thought only of the moment. Turning to search here and there, in the bureau drawers and in the wardrobe, she finally drew a handkerchief out from a bundle of linen in which

were knotted up a few lire, held in reserve, for some time, to purchase a silver crucifix. This money she placed in Giovanni's hands.

"You are a good boy," she said, "and I am sure that you have a little compassion for us, so do me a kindness, and Damiano, and all of us; find out where he is and try to see him, and give him these few coins; tell him his mother prays for him! The Lord will bless you! Go as quick as you can. Oh, if you could see him to-night!"

"It is possible. I will do the best I can. Patience! Even if they clap me also into that cage, supposing they recognize me, on my word I will try to see him!"

"And to-morrow morning?"

"To-morrow morning, if he doesn't come to you, I will, to tell you all I know."

And he left hastily, fearing that he might break down in tears, for he felt a clutch at his throat.

When morning came and brought with it neither Damiano nor Giovanni, the two women began to fear that the affair was more serious than Giovanni had thought. And as is always the case uncertainty increased their terror. Later, not knowing where to turn, the poor mother went to pour out her story into the ears of the curate of San Calimero, who had shown her unfailing kindness from the time they had been living in the Via Quadronno. It was toward the evening of the same Monday that Stella thought it well to acquaint her brother Celso with the sad affair. We have already seen how she was received at the rectory, and by what sort of hopes she was comforted.

At last, next morning, Signor Lorenzo made his appearance in the poor apartment. They hardly recognized him. He was pale, his eyes rolled, his lips twitched nervously with the anger that still consumed him. He told them he had just come out of prison, without knowing the reason why he had been arrested or why released. Of Damiano he had been able to learn

nothing, except that his case might take time to decide. He had come to offer the women some little hope and consolation, and he finished by pouring out with violent imprecations the rage which had devoured his heart for twenty years. It took some time to quiet him. He left, swearing to Teresa and Stella that he would never abandon them, promising that he would do what he could to establish the innocence of Damiano before all the world, and blaming himself for the unfortunate occurrence.

He had promised to return. He did, in fact, return on Tuesday morning. But in opening the door he caught sight, between the mother and her daughter, of a large priestly hat and a black robe. His face darkened.

"Oh, if they have put the matter in the hands of the priests," he muttered, "let them stay there!"

And he turned his back to that door. The ex-friar—for it was he, come in person that very morning to persuade the widow that she should think seriously of the future and save her children from the perils of the world—the ex-friar did not see him, and continued his pathetic pleadings.

Thus the caprices of a powerful idler on the one hand, and, on the other, a vain and indiscreet zeal, were playing havoc with the fate of our poor family. But the obscure facts already related found an echo even in gilded apartments, where courtly vices and intolerant bigotry not infrequently flourish side by side.

In an ample hall on the ground floor of the *Illustrissimo's* palace was gathered, on the Sunday after Damiano's arrest, a circle of dames and cavaliers of more than usual numbers and magnificence. The *Illustrissimo* had invited these distinguished guests to a splendid Sunday banquet. After dinner, it being still midsummer, the noble company had entertained themselves for a while in the gardens, upon which the ground-floor apartments opened. Two chamberlains, dressed in black, with white

gloves and white cravats, at the head of a satellite train of waiters in embroidered livery, circulated among them, offering cups of coffee on silver trays.

Carriages had arrived for some of the guests, and from the courtyard could be heard the creaking of wheels, the stamping of horses, and perhaps also an occasional oath from the human automatons in wigs.

All the company, on the approach of dusk, returned to the hall, which had been already illuminated by torches and by alabaster lamps depending from the vaulted ceiling; they dispersed into groups here and there, without losing sight of the master and mistress of the house.

The latter, sitting by herself on a sofa covered with scarlet satin, had gathered around her the older women, who were most gorgeously arrayed. The lady, on these solemn reception days, did not appear, to the eyes of her intimate friends, as she did during the rest of the week. The relative value of names and of ranks was ever present in a heart which held also place for a gossip's curiosity concerning her neighbors' affairs, and for a secret complacency with which she sought the opportunity to make society flourish and prosper under the shadow of devotion, or rather under the shadow of her own party. She knew how to find courteous and honeyed words for her illustrious friends, and received with patronizing smiles the proffers of subserviency from the many who came to solicit her influence. Sometimes she would even go so far as to listen, without being scandalized, to certain anecdotes, certain tales of the great world, which were colored in the telling, or veiled under a guise of elegant gayety. And so she also could—in her way at least—feel sympathy for human misery.

Throughout the gathering that evening one might divine that a certain mysterious preoccupation ruled the minds of all, like the summer clouds which in an azure sky pass one by one across the sun. It was easy to see

that host and hostess were kept alert and suspicious, each by a different though equally serious care; for husband and wife, from opposite sides of the hall, looked at each other askance, as if with long-dissimulated anger and tacit distrust. It seemed as if not a few of the noble guests were in the secret of this domestic discord, and took sides with one or the other of the influential rivals. And truly every now and then the animated and noisy conversation would suddenly languish and die out, and here and there through the hall confidences passed between neighbor and neighbor, half winks, and words cut short by perplexity or caution, all signs denoting that something secret and mysterious was feared or expected.

At the right of the sofa, talking to the mistress of the house, sat, rigid and severe, another powerful and much-sought lady, the Countess Cunegonda, sister of the Illustrissimo. In the dignity of her person, in her dress of black arabesqued silk, in the majestic pose of her head, adorned with a lace headdress, one saw in her the habit of command, mingled with that species of proud humility whereby she had been able to make herself almost the center of a new and secret Inquisition. And the Illustrissimo feared her. Near her in ample armchairs sat two other countesses, her friends, whose nobility was as pure as gold, and whose piety was famous. On the head of one of them towered a turban of sky-blue crape, which protected two richly curling blond ringlets, made to order in Paris. Her dress of silk muslin, cut very low, seemed to be inviting inspection of the remains of treasures that once had been the theme of many an Arcadian sonnet, were it not that the lady was carefully wrapped in a long Turkish scarf, which descended to her feet. The other countess wore a pompous headdress, resembling the basket of Flora. She had neither curls nor jewels; she did not dress as gorgeously as her neighbor, but one read in the languor of her eyes, in the turn of her neck, and in her self-satisfied pose, a certain harmless preten-

sion to youth. Indeed, one who glanced only at the black eyebrows, and the rosy cheeks, and not at the subtle wrinkles, nor the dim eyes, nor the studiously compressed lips, might have said that she was in her thirties.

Behind these three inseparable powers were five or six gentlemen, some standing, others sitting, keeping up a languid conversation; two priests; a councilor; and a maternal uncle of the mistress of the house, an exceedingly rich man who assumed conceited airs and would not suffer contradiction; and near the wall, in the shadow, a pair of minor planets, two persons of middle age, who never spoke except when spoken to, but always looked at the last person who spoke to them and smiled and bowed.

"Dear Marquis," said the Councilor Zebedia in a nasal tone, taking up the thread of conversation which had been interrupted by a disdainful glance turned in that direction by the master of the house, "I repeat it, if we wish to succeed in damming the torrent of subversive novelties, we must unite all our forces—will, prudence, charity, and even a little cunning—then, with that power which was given to us by nature, being in high places and governing the present with an eye to the future, we must seek to lay the foundation of that earthly hierarchy without which the world, in less than forty years, will surely return to chaos."

"Eh! these are theories and nothing else, my dear Signor," broke in Count Alberigo, the uncle of the mistress of the house, with some asperity. "I can tell you that the world is not going to be reduced to dust so soon; for thousands of years people who think as you do have harped on that string, and the world has always been his who knew how to grasp it. The mob growls at times, and struggles and protests, it acts like the donkey relieved of its pack-saddle; it brays and kicks and tumbles around on the grass, but the moment you put back the harness it again becomes content to obey. But it is for us to know how to command."

"Yes, yes," answered the Councilor, phlegmatically, "but when the social order turns topsy-turvy, when so loud a cry is raised for the vile multitude—an ant-hill which hitherto has always retained its name of plebeian, and now thinks to ennoble itself by the name of the people—eh, eh, eh!"

"And let us take notice," put in one of the priests, and from the opinions he uttered, which the reader already knows in part, he will have no difficulty in recognizing Father Apollinaris, "let us take notice that, for the most part, it is we who have unbridled and spoiled these people. This universal cry for light, light, for instruction, civilization, humanity, and other pretty words, has relieved them of their saddle, to retain the comparison made by Count Alberigo."

"The catechism and the primer," added the other reverend gentleman, a plump and rubicund canon, "are all that is needed for the education of the people, if we wish them to remain in their place. And it is for us, who have studied, to crush their wild doctrines. The people, as seen by these philosophasters, these prophets of the modern Babylon, is a dream, an abstraction; we must study it as it really is, this people, whom a classic writer, one of the wisest of pagans, has justly called the many-headed beast. Whoever has read knows this."

"My dear Don Fulgencio," answered Count Alberigo, "it is very true that a part of the fault is ours. Instead of keeping ourselves in the ranks of the competent we began to descend when the first step was taken"—

"Certainly, we have gone down, down. We have mingled with the crowd, and we are now feeling its buffetings," added the Councilor Zebedia.

"But the worst scandal"—the Countess Cunegonda now entered the conversation—"the overthrow of order and authority, and, hence, the ruin of morals and the triumph of unbelief—came from the shameful mingling of classes, the profusion of money spent in worldly pleasures, and

the corrupting influence of gold substituted for the true spirit of charity, for wise and keen-sighted beneficence."

Risking a quarrel in the circle of her faithful allies, the old lady looked across the hall to the corner where, in the midst of a noisier conversation, her brother the Illustrissimo stood surrounded by flatterers and worshipers. To understand the meaning of that allusion it is necessary to be acquainted with certain secret and important matters which had come up that morning in the Countess Cunegonda's conversation with her intimates. There had been talk, but always in a veiled and discreet fashion, of certain vile and vulgar intrigues, which might lower the dignity of a great family; the story had been trumpeted abroad by unworthy persons, who, profiting by the weakness of the Illustrissimo, had made use of his money and his name to exploit some vicious and vengeful schemes.

Even the consort of the Illustrissimo, who, until now, in delicate matters of this sort, had always maintained the most scrupulous reserve, appeared that morning at a most unusual hour in the councils of her sister-in-law. Their two aged excellencies had talked in a cabinet apart, for a good half hour.

It was after this talk that the Countess Cunegonda and her inquisitors decided, without delay, and without regard to others, to hush up these scandals as far as possible. Among them came Father Apollinaris, the right-hand man of the Countess, to speak at an opportune hour about the family of Damiano. Past events had opened a door to his suspicions, but he knew more than he told. The conclusion arrived at was that the poor young girl should be guarded from all threatened dangers and placed as early as possible in a "Retreat." For this purpose, great art and mystery must be used, as the Countess Cunegonda did not wish to declare open war upon her most illustrious brother, for fear of a still greater scandal.

The Illustrissimo, on his side, it must be explained, had discovered a part of this pious plot—for some hours pre-

viously, as he was on the point of sitting down to table, faithful Rosso had come in and whispered a mysterious message in his ear, to which he had answered, "Let Omobono come to-morrow morning, and we will see him."

CHAPTER XXXII

GAYETY AND GOSSIP

WHILE thus, in one part of the hall, the more serious guests were discussing opinions, prejudices and little antipathies, religious and political, under the majestic guise of social order, morality, and popular custom, in another part elegant men and women had formed themselves into various groups according as they sought sympathy or curiosity, indifference, or annoyance.

The Illustrissimo had left the contingent of older guests to his wife, and pausing amid one or another of the gayer groups took pleasure in listening to curious adventures, the *chronique scandaleuse* of the week, or the foolish novelties of politics. Thus, upholding his dignity and his popularity, he was duly tickled by the compliments that were showered on him; and his brows gradually cleared of the clouds of suspicion and uneasiness that during dinner had eclipsed his usual good humor.

At that moment he was standing in a circle of women, the youngest and the most beautiful in the gathering. Not one of those elegant dames who were paying court to him would have dared to deny one of his rank the right of entering into the good graces of any one of them. Certain young men of the highest rank, a little jealous of him, were talking in undertones, perhaps ridiculing his pretensions to gallantry, while one and all puffed themselves up like peacocks, ogling the ladies and exchanging fine speeches in the fashionable jargon of the day.

The Illustrissimo leaned with much courtesy upon the back of a large chair on which a foreign lady sat with more dignity than comfort. She was a lady of thirty or so, famous for a beauty which was only just beginning to wane. She had not yet, however, forgotten the witchery of the eyes, languorous or mischievous by turns. A bare and beautiful arm, and the art with which she plied her fan, allowing the air gently to stir the lace on her breast, summoned around her like butterflies a crowd of elaborately dressed young dandies. But the Illustrissimo, that aged connoisseur of beauty, claimed all her attention, and he accepted her homage with much complacency.

Among the young men of fashion some of our acquaintances might be seen: Cavaliere Lodovico conversing mysteriously with a vivacious lady not in her first youth; Count Achilles, who had sat down to a game of *ecarté* with his friend's young wife; and the little Marquis Roberto who, like a titmouse, was skipping from group to group, saying the silliest things in the world, but laughing and creating laughter.

In the niche of a window stood two unknown men to whom nobody paid any attention, possibly because neither, amid so many men of purest blood, had even so much as a "Don" to his name. They were talking briskly, while watching the varied scenes of that frivolous comedy. The youngest, by his costume and his long, flowing hair betrayed the artist or the man of letters; the other, severe in aspect, his coat buttoned up to his chin, and with a gold snuffbox in his hand, could not be other than a physician. Why they had had the luck to be singled out for an invitation on that day neither of them knew. Finding themselves slightly embarrassed in the midst of that assemblage, and out of their element, as if in a too rarefied atmosphere, they had drawn apart, discussing in low tones all that they saw, and awaiting the opportunity of reaching the door unobserved. They knew enough about all these fine people, so that tongues were kept busy.

"I have told you that our Amphytrion is always the same," said the younger man, "the prurigo of old age still troubles him. Look at him playing the gallant to that trans-Alpine novelty."

"You are right. Confound these foreign peacocks, who bring with them their jargon and their grimaces."

"Eh, what do you expect? They are a pastime, and, after all, this is only an *opéra bouffe*; the serious part is behind the scenes."

"Which is"—

"If what is before us were all, it would be simply a matter for laughter. Here they exchange courtesies, they act in the open, one flatters the other—tinsel creatures! counterfeit gold! I much wish to be able to read the little hearts of these great people."

"You are troubling yourself a great deal about their morals."

"Well, pardon me if I pay back in this coin the favors of the Illustrissimo; but dark fancies whirl around in my head! I hope that his great dinner will not corrupt me. I came to it in a bad hour."

"I confess that we have heard some queer things—things which turn one's stomach, if you will excuse the expression."

"You say so, too, doctor?"

"Why, yes. Give ear to that young coxcomb swaying over there on his hips in front of that lady who is said to be sentimental, and whom we doctors call jaundiced."

"What are they talking about?"

"Listen, if you don't mind taking the risk of seeming rude. Do you hear? She says, '*Marquis, c'est une mystification!*' And he replies, '*Pas du tout!*' The diamond necklace that the famous Countess wears on her breast is worth less to me than the string that laces your dear little shoe.' What do you think when you hear talk like that?"

"Only a spoonful of honey. That's all I can call it."

"Standing here in the shadow, we might almost imagine that we were looking on at the demi-monde."

"If we were overheard!"

"It happens only too often in some places that one must leave at the door the love of one's neighbor."

"A good excuse!" And the doctor offered his neighbor a pinch of snuff.

"Thank you, no, doctor. But tell me, who are those sphinxes around the sofa, who pay so much court to the lady of the house?"

"Oh, those people know their business. They form the committee of the sacristy in her ladyship's household, where people and things are passed in review, judged and condemned, and those women have long arms, you may be sure. However, all that they do is done for a good purpose, of course. And first of all, and still for a good purpose, they wish you to be submissive to them. And that, young man, is a good road to fortune; accept the bribes of one of these wrinkled countesses, and you are sure to arrive."

"I am greatly obliged. But I hope never to have need of them."

"Ah! Ah! To-night I can see that there are clouds in the air. All the evening the Illustrissimo has never opened his mouth either to his wife or his sister. In the past few days—I tell you this privately—certain stories have been afloat, and not very creditable ones, in which it seems that the Illustrissimo's name is somehow implicated. There has been talk about a certain girl whom certain people wished—to do good to—you understand me?—and of a brother, or perhaps a lover, who was subjected to a good beating at the hands of a hired band."

"Oh, but that's not possible. It would be an infamous thing, too infamous!"

"Well, perhaps it is not true. I don't give it to you as a matter of history; still there must be some basis of truth."

"Forgive me, doctor, if I can't believe it. But what has all this to do with appearances here to-night, as of two hostile camps?"

"Can't you see? Suppose that it's true; can you not imagine what havoc has been created by the chatter of these bewigged and befrizzled gossips? I tell you that something in the air makes me positive it is true."

"Ah, but you doctors are malicious!"

"Eh! what do you expect? You write in your novels what we witness and sometimes take a hand in."

"Enough. I shall try to seek for further light."

The two unknown passed behind the backs of the servants, who had just arrived with refreshments, and stepped outside as mere humble pedestrians, whom even the doorkeeper did not trouble himself to salute.

Inside, the conversation grew more animated within certain groups, from which the stiff circle of the hostess kept itself apart. Cavaliers and ladies circled about here and there, exchanged courtesies and salutations, talked of music, the fashions, the races, and other trivialities. The *Illustrissimo* had not yet finished chattering with the foreign countess, but from its suave beginnings the conversation had passed into mutual lamentations over the misfortune of living in a city which was neither London, nor Paris, nor St. Petersburg. And it would seem that the *Illustrissimo* was willing to unburden himself still further of his ill-humor, for he interrupted the lady in the midst of some compliment.

"Those are illusions," he said. "Milan is as gossipy as the smallest of provincial cities. Do you think that it is possible to say or do anything here without setting all tongues to wagging? For myself, I have always held myself superior to these babblings; but glances, opinions, conventions, leave one neither liberty nor peace."

The lady expressed her surprise with an accent that was more Tartar than French, and the *Illustrissimo* continued:

"So it is, dear Countess! Women like you are rare. It is rarely that good sense and good taste are combined with beauty, and our ladies—oh, let me say no more; I could amaze you."

Just then a resounding laugh, such as rarely disturbed the echoes of that magnificent hall, interrupted the various conversations, and all eyes were turned to a group of dandified youths who, near the open balcony, had crowded to hear a tale that Marquis Roberto had just finished.

"It is true, as I told it," continued the beardless youth, adjusting the knot of his cravat. "And have you heard nothing of poor Martigny? That incarnate fiend was caught in one of his accustomed exploits, and I don't know how it will all end. It was a great and serious affair, I tell you, a semi-revolution! A hundred artisans and other imbeciles had jumped upon him, and the master thrust out there, parried here—turned, stormed, trampled upon his foes. In less time than I can tell you he strewed over the earth at least twenty of them, and who knows what he would have done with the others if a troop of soldiers and gendarmes had not rushed to the spot, who swept all the rabble from the field and bore off poor Martigny to jail?"

At this grave recital all were amazed. Some were aroused to sympathetic anger, others doubted, a few openly declared their unbelief. Only two of the hearers said no word, the *Illustrissimo* and the *Cavaliere Lodovico*.

As the evening advanced, ladies and gentlemen sought the gaming-tables, or passed into the billiard-room and other splendid apartments. More than one young marchioness, more than one light-headed countess, unbending little by little, deigned to lend ear to the confidences of this man or that; others, wandering about from room to room on the arm of some fortunate young beau, at last drifted out unnoticed upon a balcony adorned with

flowers that exhaled a delightful perfume; others, reclining luxuriously upon a soft sofa in some solitary cabinet, illumined only by the timid light of an alabaster lamp, were listening perhaps for the first time to an adorer whose wooing scintillated with French words.

At that hour, Countess Cunegonda had departed. As soon as she had gone, the hostess also announced to some of the ladies who surrounded her that an attack of headache made it impossible for her to stay up any longer. Her retirement was a signal for the breaking-up of the council of the faithful. Its members disappeared one by one, not without having saluted the Illustrissimo with bows, compliments and good wishes. He, who through spite had pretended not to be aware that his wife had left the room, coldly thanked these good ladies and answered not a few of them with only a slight nod.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE LAST HOPE

AND Stella?—Stella, in the interim, who knew nothing of the sordid battle that had begun between the two adverse powers who were disputing her as their prey, passed these days in silent and painful uncertainty.

After the misfortune that befell Damiano, the mother and daughter found themselves hopelessly facing a sorrowful future. For weeks they were plunged in solitude and tears, continuing to work for their living from day to day. But their work was scanty and ill-paid. They needed the presence of him whose courage had sustained them until now, whose willing self-sacrifice made them forget that poverty might be at hand. Those visitors who had appeared occasionally with promises of favors and protection were seen no more; and the two bereft women,

utterly alone, could no longer think of the morrow without fear.

Teresa, because of her age and the sufferings she had undergone, felt her strength dwindling day by day; continuous work broke down her weak health, and more than once, at the coming of the tardy night, she realized that she had not earned enough for the daily bread. The poor woman said nothing, but Stella was well aware that her mother's sight was gradually failing so that when sewing she could no longer thread her needle. Consequently she was reduced for the greater part of the day to mere mending, darning the coarse stockings of neighbors as poor as herself.

Stella, though she felt death in her heart, though silent tears often trickled down upon the delicate embroidery on which she was employed, did her best to supply with unintermittent work, when she could get it, all that it was impossible for her mother to do. But all was too little to enable them to live through those miserable days without any approach to peace and comfort. How often, without pausing from her toil, did she lift up to Heaven a prayerful sigh! How often, in the middle of a sunny day, hearing her mother complain that the sky was clouding over and that she could scarcely see, did she restrain the cry of her heart and say that she too could hardly distinguish the minute designs of her embroidery.

At first, Teresa would often express a hope that those good people to whom they had so often been recommended would remember them. But Stella never had believed implicitly in the sincerity of the promises of their would-be protectors, and could not persuade herself that any good could come from them. And as the days passed away, and took with them those slender hopes, when after long weeks they did not succeed in learning anything about the fate of Damiano, and saw nothing of either Giovanni or Signor Lorenzo, who had promised to do all

in their power for the innocent boy, then indeed the two women resigned themselves to the conviction that their fate lay in the hands of God alone.

They did not know that neither the veteran nor Giovanni had forgotten the persecuted Damiano, nor that, if they lacked heart to climb once more those humble stairs, it was only because, despite their good will, they had no consolation to bring with them. Nor in their simple brains could they have imagined that the great personages who had apparently forgotten them in their hour of greatest trouble were perfectly well informed of what had befallen them and pretended oblivion deliberately, for ends that were not easily to be discovered by them.

Thus passed, from one agony to another, from one fear to another, the days and the months. Stella trembled for her mother; every day she was more and more confirmed in the belief that she could not last long under this burden of poverty. Besides the weakness in her eyes, she appeared to be in the first stages of some illness that might at any moment confine her to her bed. Celso came rarely to see them, for he found it difficult to evade the almost ceaseless vigilance of his superior; but his coming only increased their grief, for he could do nothing save weep. He could find no way of accomplishing what he nevertheless looked upon as his first and most sacred duty.

Stella in those two months performed miracles. She thought of everything. By hard work, economy, and pious frauds, she had succeeded in hiding from her mother the lack of the most necessary things. But poverty was in the house.

For many days now they had had no fire. Their little oven had gone out, because of the lack of charcoal and because the scanty provision of wood furnished by Damiano some months previously was gone. Stella, toiling day and night when there was work to do, would almost

every morning visit the two or three honest merchants who were now her sole patrons, hoping, with tears in her eyes, for some advance of pay for the embroideries which she still had in hand. Seldom did she bring home more than enough to keep them from starving that day. Late in the morning a bite of bread and a cup of milk sufficed for her breakfast, but she wished her mother to eat something warm, and she would softly descend to the nearest inn, and get a little new-made broth poured into a remnant of thin soup. At sunset what money was left would usually suffice to purchase in the same inn another dish of soup, which they would share.

She alone knew how she wept at night, when she found herself alone, and could pray no longer, and was too tired to sleep in her little bed, and thought of all that had been and might be.

Sometimes she would console herself a little when her mother, not yet aware of the whole truth, mentioned some little thing she would like to have and Stella found herself able to procure it. Often, however, it was necessary to hide behind some harmless fib the fact that they could not do as they had done. Thus, when there was no more wood in the house, she told her mother that it would be better to have their soup made in the inn until Damiano came back, in order that they might have the whole day free for work. And the mother could not see Stella blush, nor perceive that she was striving to keep her voice from breaking.

Meanwhile, a saint's day was approaching, which is often a terror to poor people, the day of St. Michael. Stella knew well that, shortly after Easter, Damiano had paid Signor Pietro a half year's rent. She well knew that if the other half were not forthcoming on Michaelmas, that stony-hearted man, after seizing everything they had in the house, would put them in the streets. But where could they find the necessary seventy-five lire? Who would take the risk of lending it? And how could they

return it, supposing that misfortune never wearied of remaining with them? Besides it was repugnant to the modest girl to go hither and thither, weeping and recounting her troubles, and she could not say anything to her mother for fear of making her suffer further. Sometimes she thought of applying to Signor Lorenzo; that honest soul, if he could do nothing else, might assist her with good advice. But for a long time he had not come to see them, and Stella decided that he wished to have nothing further to do with them.

One morning, however, she took heart, and without saying anything to her mother walked straight to the veteran's house in the Via San Simone. She did not find him in. The door was closed and an old shoemaker who inhabited a nearby room, on the same floor, informed her that the old soldier now rose with the sun, went out and was not seen again all day.

She returned home and said nothing. At midday she told her mother that she must go out again for some work that had been promised her; and taking a small package, which she had wrapped up earlier in the morning, she departed all in a tremble. She walked quickly and confusedly from street to street, as if she feared to be seen; she felt as if all eyes were upon her, and as if she were engaged in some evil deed. Evading the more frequented thoroughfares, she turned into the Via di Tre Monasteri, and entered with a shiver the door of a pawnshop.

In that place, which swallows up all that in better days is a sign of wealth, all the relics of ease or of comfort, the poor man parts from the last precious memorial of his parents, the wretched laborer from his last bit of silverware, the widow from her wedding-ring or the crucifix that hung over her bed.

Never before had Stella entered here. She could not find words to explain her mission, but an old servant of the place, who, though inured to these scenes, had not

lost all sense of compassion, saw the embarrassment of the poor girl, and, making her come back into the offices where deposits were kept, took the bundle from her hand, opened it and found therein a little pile of silverware, a buckle, also of silver, which had apparently decorated a military belt, and a necklace of garnets set in gold. This was all that remained to the family from their modest fortune of the past. The necklace had been left to Stella as a memorial, by a good woman, dead for some years, who at the time when they dwelt in the Via Quadronno, had insisted on accompanying the little girl to her first communion in the church of San Celso. In a few minutes the value of the little deposit was estimated and an employé put a pawn ticket in Stella's hands, counted her out eighty lire in Milanese money, then turned angrily to a group of women who were crowding around his desk with their tales of woe.

"One at a time!" he cried; "this is not the Well of St. Patrick!"

The thought of her father's honor, and Damiano's, and the affection that gives courage and faith, sustained the young girl in this sad plight. She returned quickly toward her home, feeling braver, with the inner consciousness of having fulfilled a duty. Entering a church on her way, she thought again of the benevolent lady who in happier days had given her that necklace, and prayed for her, as if to make amends for having thus surrendered a dear memorial. Then she had the courage, before turning into the Piazza Fontana, to climb up herself to the attic where Signor Pietro, the lessee of the large tenement-house, made his home amid a pile of rags and scrap iron. That wheezy old miser received her in non-committal fashion, as he did not know whether she had come to pay him or to tell the old story of poverty; but he became gracious at the sight of the money, which the girl, with some words of excuse, laid upon the table. He raised his eyes and looked at her fixedly, with a certain malicious grim-

ace, almost as if he were about to ask her how she had managed to obtain this gift from God. Luckily, she did not understand his expression.

Once more at home, she felt as if a burden had been lifted from her heart, and ran lightly to her mother to beg pardon for her lateness, when the sound of a low, grave voice came to her ears. She stepped forward, and in the person who, without noticing her arrival, went on talking to her mother, she recognized Father Apollinaris.

The father was explaining that he had known for some time of the poverty of the family and had come to propose to Teresa the expedient of placing Stella in a retreat where she would lack nothing that was necessary, "for this life or the next." This announcement was a blow to the poor woman, but she found no way of combating those solemn arguments.

As soon as he realized the girl's presence, the father made her sit down and talked at length with her also, without permitting her to answer. He showed her how great a mercy was this chance he offered her, at a moment so opportune; told her that her mother never again would want for anything, because if the daughter would consent to enter the Retreat, the mother also would fall under the protection of great people, who would provide her with everything. In short, he gave her to understand, with an air of mystery, that her submission would be of the greatest benefit to all the family.

Concluding by asking her to reflect seriously on all that he had told her, he rose and left the two women in breathless confusion. But before going out he turned to announce that he would return the next day to hear their decision.

That evening, in the accustomed intimate society of the Countess Cunegonda, he expressed himself as not a little triumphant over so fine a victory, and there was one present who cited as a parallel the pathetic example of the wandering sheep.

The next morning Stella rose with the dawn and opened her window. The fresh air, the serene morning light, which irradiated the statue of the Madonna of the Dome, consoled her somewhat in the trouble she experienced over the novel thoughts that had not allowed her an hour of unbroken sleep. With mild melancholy she gazed on the light that struck the hundred white pinnacles lifted to the sky, which for so many years she had seen every morning gilded by the rising sun, apparently as light and transparent as if carved by the hands of angels; she gazed on the houses, whose highest windows were opening one after the other, and the street below, and the Piazza Fontana, in which a humble artisan would appear, or a woman of the people, or the wagon of a milkman. And she thought that perhaps the next day she might not be inhaling thus, alone and in freedom, the air that came from Brianza, that perhaps she might never again see those roofs, those houses, that portion of heaven.

She turned to the corner of the room in which her bed stood. Very softly, so that she might not be heard, she detached from the wall the cage of her canary, and placed it on the window-sill. The bird chirped cheerfully, and, jumping upon one of the perches in the cage, beat its little wings and seemed as if it were calling to its good friend with its first trill. Stella smiled upon it and called to it herself with something of her old gayety. This sole companion of her every joy and pain reminded her somehow of Rocco. She raised her hand for a moment, and, as if surprised by a sudden thought, opened the door of the cage. The canary leaped out of its little prison, jumped first on the hand and then on the shoulder of the young girl, then tried a short flight, trilling louder than before, but returned speedily to the window-sill on which Stella was leaning, perched for a moment on her shoulder, as if it wished to give thanks for its liberty and to salute her once more, then at last took flight and disappeared.

When Stella saw it no longer, nor heard its songs, she

dried a tear, and leaving the window, closed it, so that the sun might not disturb her mother's slumbers in the alcove.

She prepared the breakfast for her mother and herself as on other mornings, wondering the while whether some day her brother, freed, and recognized as innocent, would not return to the house. Half an hour later, Stella had stripped the bed on which she was no longer to sleep, and, having gathered a few things to carry away with her, and some little souvenirs of her youth, valuable only to herself, with a face as serene and beautiful as ever, she entered her mother's room.

At that moment the door opened, and Signor Lorenzo made his appearance, more morose and disheveled than she ever had seen him.

"Was it you, my daughter," he began, "who yesterday morning came to find the old wolf at San Simone? Don't blush, there's no reason why you should. My neighbor Gaspere, the shoemaker to whom you applied, told me of a pretty girl, with a kind manner and a melancholy face. It was you, of course, I said so at once. But what did you want? Old blockhead that I am, I have no longer time to change either my skin or my faults; and if a word angers me or a Christian refuses to do as I wish, I am no longer myself. But with you, my own Stella, with you, the daughter of my Victor, no! Tell me, then; do you need anything from your old friend? Tell me."

Stella trembled; she had not yet had an understanding with her mother, and though she had much at heart, she knew not what to respond to this brusque yet affectionate question. Signor Lorenzo noticed that a tear fell from the girl's eye. He took two steps forward, looked at her, looked at Teresa, and after a moment's thought exclaimed:

"What is the matter now? Neither of you will speak. Oh, I see! There's some secret here. And what have I

done, that you want nothing more to do with me? As to you, Signora Teresa, I know well enough that your priests have turned you against me, but, all the same, I wish to be good for something still. I think of Victor, and I am no turncoat."

"Pardon, Signor Lorenzo!" said the widow at last, "I am sorry that you are displeased, but you are wrong to think evil of us. Certainly there are good people who interest themselves in my favor, and that of my poor daughter. I will tell you"—

"What is the use?" interrupted Stella, timidly.

"Speak plainly for once," said the old soldier, irritably. "It seems that you are the same as ever."

"What can I say, Signor Lorenzo, except that to find someone that thinks of my girl, and is able to obtain lodging for her in a holy house, is a singular grace, a bit of good fortune from heaven!"

"Ah, didn't I tell you?" shouted the old soldier, losing all control of himself. "That's what comes, O Victor, from having taken to wife a brainless saint! See where your children will wind up! and I, old mule that I am, obstinately trying to make something of them. Oh, I have understood it for some time—the house of my comrade-in-arms is no longer a house for me. I must go, as I came, without the medicine of a little love! Patience! I shall die alone, and it will matter to no one that I am no more. But you, Stella, remember! I am your protector; some day or other, when no one else will do anything to help you, the brother of your father will sell his cross of honor to give you a bit of bread."

Without waiting to hear what the women had to say, he rushed furiously home and remained shut up all day. None of the events in his life had left a fiercer bitterness in his heart than this.

When he had gone, Stella, without a word, threw her arms around her mother's neck and broke into a great sob.

At noon a modest, covered chaise stopped before the house. A moment later, Teresa, not yet recovered from the agitation in which she had been thrown by Lorenzo's departure, saw a lady enter. She was in the autumn of life, her face was dry and composed; her headdress white and ruffled, her gown and shawl were black. Following her came a priest with a crooked neck and in a faded robe. At every word of the lady, he bowed his head, with the forced smile of one who gives assent through reverence or fear. The lady was no less a person than the Countess Cunegonda. In her quality as the lady patroness of the Retreat, she made her appearance in the company of Don Aquilino, sent to her by her sister-in-law for the express purpose of accomplishing the work so charitably decided on by the two ladies.

Don Aquilino desired to say a few words to the girl who had timidly advanced to kiss the lady's hand, but the pious maxim he had in his head ended in a mute contortion of the lips. The Countess, having saluted Teresa with a dignified wave of the hand, as the latter stood confusedly seeking for thanks and excuses, drew the young girl softly to her, and caressing her black and lustrous tresses, said to her, with affected unction: "Come, my dear, let us make with a willing heart the sacrifice of the rebellious will; let us prepare ourselves for humility, for blind obedience; let us respond to the call, and then we shall conquer the three enemies of our souls, the world, the flesh, and the devil."

Stella, moved, not by these words, but by the strength of the emotions that had been at strife within her many hours, turned her head away so that her tears might not be seen. Teresa, much edified by the exhortation of the lady patroness, stood with her hands joined in an attitude of mingled admiration and grief. The restive chaplain, who did not at all understand this method of running a knife into a neighbor's throat for the purpose of doing him good, but who had not mind enough to oppose the

will of those who sent him, drew from his pocket now and then a snuff-box, and sought with big pinches of the dust to dissipate the lingering scruples of his conscience.

After a few more serious words from the lady, Stella, who would have wished again and again to kiss her mother, forced herself to self-restraint and simply extended her hand. Then, taking up her small parcel, she informed the lady that she was ready. A servant, who was waiting outside, came in to relieve her of the burden. Don Aquilino, until then a silent witness, now assuming unwonted courage, thought it behooved him to offer this meager comfort:

"Be of good cheer, my daughter! Bear your cross willingly, and, after all, you are not going into the cloister. And if you have no vocation"—

But the lady turned on him an eye of fire and cut short his words:

"What is it you are saying? Do you think that is right? Putting in doubt the good intention of this young girl! May God pardon you!"

The priest dared not speak another syllable. Turning his shoulder to the door, he made a deep reverence, allowing the Countess and Stella to pass in front of him. Teresa lacked the strength to follow them. The moment was too sad; and for the first time the idea that she might remain alone, that she might never again see her daughter seemed to her utterly insupportable.

The sounds of the wheels died in the distance, and with her hands clasped as in prayer, she lifted her eyes to heaven. Then her gaze wandered around the room, hesitated, stopped. It seemed to her that she could see nothing. Almost on her hands and knees, she dragged herself to the corner in which stood the bed. She found it disordered. With her clouded vision she sought the door through which Stella had disappeared; a black darkness covered everything, as if it were already night. For the first time a horrible fear possessed her, the fear that she

might become blind forever. She sat down, but could not weep.

The two poor rooms were silent, and she was alone.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE RETREAT

MEANWHILE, the carriage of the lady protectress was proceeding toward the Retreat. Stella, sitting opposite the Countess, held down her pale face and kept silent. The other, erect and dignified, tendered her now and then a word of compassion, which she thought must be comforting. But the priest, squeezed in a corner at the side of the great lady, turned his eyes, now troubled, now pious, from one to the other, hardly daring to recur to his first thought that to do good by force was hardly that flower of charity it pretended to be. When a considerable part of the city had been traversed, the carriage turned into a long, deserted street, flanked by a high, decaying wall. Here, at the entrance to the Retreat, it halted. Don Aquilino was the first to alight, but he hardly knew how to find the carriage-step. He turned to give his hand to Stella, who, though she had not spoken during the drive, seemed nevertheless more cheerful and contented than at first. The lady in descending leaned over to the ear of the priest, to whisper something that he barely understood, to which he responded by a humble inclination of the head. Having entered the vestibule, Don Aquilino pulled the bell-rope. At the first sound of the bell, the heavy worm-eaten door of the Retreat swung open, without revealing anyone. They advanced through the dark entrance, and the door closed behind them as silently and mechanically as it had opened.

The Countess turned with a gentler expression toward Stella, and taking her hand led her under a low portico shut in with dusty glass windows, through which struggled a greenish light. Thence they passed to a basement chamber, deserted, and looking all the dingier because of some old pictures on the damp walls, dotted with holes and spots of dirt. The silence, the deathly appearance, and the sepulchral chill of that room, shot a vague terror through the young girl, who, looking timidly at her guide, exclaimed:

"Oh, Signora! Where are you taking me? This looks like a prison."

The lady smiled, and pressing Stella's hand to her heart, she said:

"Have patience, my daughter; you will now find your new family."

Don Aquilino, with his hat off, strode after his patroness; and he wondered whether the Countess, on her return, as a consolation for the sorry expedition of which he was a part, would not ask him, that day at least, to favor her with his company at table.

They crossed another entrance, another dreary room, and found themselves, at last, in a sort of reception parlor, cleaner and fresher, which opened on a little garden. Two women of advanced years, dressed in dark serge, who sat near a large window, rose and advanced respectfully toward the Countess. The latter with a sign bade them be seated, and, sitting down herself, turned to the elder of the pair.

"Mother Eleutaria," she said, slowly, "here is the girl of whom you have heard me speak. She recommends herself to your goodness, to your compassion. Let us hope that a short period of this edifying and retired life will fructify those good inclinations which spiritual grace, rather than merit or works, has given birth to in her heart. Approach, Stella; kiss the hand of your superior, your new mother. We place you under her

care; and here, if you show yourself docile and obedient, if you give signs of repentance and amendment, will very soon be restored to you that quiet conscience of which the world has sought to rob you. Beautiful is the virtue which passes stainless through the tempestuous sea of life, but the virtue which, once fallen, rises again is more beautiful and more glorious. A penitent heart is like coral, which, ascending from the water into the air, solidifies itself."

The girl could not understand this artificial language. She felt tranquilly conscious of her own innocence. She thought and loved as in the earlier days of her life, and for no other purpose than for the good of her mother and her brother. Accepting the trial that seemed to be demanded of her, she had let herself be brought to this Retreat, highly praised by many good people, with the same religious sentiment of purity as when, a few years before, she had gone to her first communion. Nor could she understand the reason why the austere lady should seem to impose upon her, as a penance, what she herself did for love alone. But an uncertain fear of harm, a confusion of thoughts never felt before, constrained her, and though she wished to say something, she felt as if an icy hand had been laid upon her heart. Perhaps she foresaw that this was not to be a home of peace to her, that other sorrows, other terrors, awaited her. Meeting the severe look of the two women, she remained silent.

"Stella is the daughter of a soldier," resumed the Countess; "her mother, a weak woman, has neglected those practices which alone can be an antidote to the evil tendencies of the world. To-day more than ever, the results of bad habits flourish in every class. There are those who make a trade of vice, and this poor little one was walking on the edge of an abyss. None the less, Heaven has permitted that not in vain should be the efforts of those who have consecrated themselves to that work which the world calls philanthropy, and

which I call most Christian. In a word, we have saved her; and to this house, where so many souls have been wrested from vice, she comes with good grace, Mother Eleutaria, under the ægis of her virtue, to regain the white robe of innocence."

Proud of this edifying speech, the lady looked attentively, first at Mother Eleutaria and then at Stella, and thought to read in their composed faces the triumph of her clemency. Then, addressing Don Aquilino:

"It is your turn now. We have done our part; now you must do yours."

Mother Eleutaria, who had not yet said a syllable to her new daughter, but who had studied her in sidelong glances, rose, and approaching an old wardrobe, opened it with a large key that hung suspended at her belt, drew out two registers and a card, and placed them upon a desk that stood in the middle of the room, before which Don Aquilino hastened to take his seat, as if he had been moved by an invisible force.

Mother Eleutaria (so she had been called ever since she had emerged, still young, from her convent, which had been one of the latest suppressed at the end of the last century) held as superior the reins of this pious house, which had been recently founded for young girls. Accustomed to the silent discipline of the cloister, she looked despitefully at the authority, the patronage, and the scandals among those classes from whom the officials were selected to regulate matters in the Retreat. She wished rather to have been allowed to do and undo at her own will, according to the system adopted in older days by mother superiors in the convent where she had taken her vows. She was old and irritable, and wished to be flattered and feared. She could not endure that any layman influential in the outer world should dictate to her. In the thirty years and more, in which, worn out by the petty passions of monastic life, she had consumed herself in the squalor of a suppressed religious

house, she had cherished a single hope, one glory: that of seeing re-opened, through her own efforts, the same convent from which she had been expelled, and there to lord it over a band of poor creatures, or, to use her own fine metaphor, a family of white doves. Then she hoped, in her turn, to hold that absolute sway, the joy of which she never had tasted here, on account of the grave responsibilities and the obligation to bend herself to the formalities, the minute regulations, and the prescriptions of the lady patronesses, and most especially of those omnipotent ones among them who could do either good or harm, help or obstruct, by the sole exercise of their will. As the Countess Cunegonda was the lady who had the greatest authority, she was to her the most distasteful. It was she whose yoke was borne most impatiently by the proud and sullen Superior of the Retreat.

The Countess knew this, and was the more convinced of it from the obstinate silence of the old woman, who certainly wished to free herself from the necessity of accepting this girl. Even now she had determined to triumph in the end at whatever cost, and she counted upon the assistance of the cowardly priest. The latter, in the midst of that strife of the powers, thought that he had never found himself in as thorny a path.

Placing himself, therefore, at the desk, he mechanically lifted and lowered his head over the books that lay before him, continuing to hold his pen in the pewter ink-stand, without knowing how to begin the interrogatory. This formality was necessary, as it was enforced by the regulations, before a girl could be admitted to the house.

Evidently the Superior enjoyed his embarrassment. Looking at the lady with furtive and malicious eyes, and nervously fingering the beads of the rosary that hung from her belt, she smiled to herself, thinking that if she wished she could on the lightest pretext send this girl away, and all the more easily that she saw her brought

here with a certain mystery, the key to which she would gladly have secured.

But the Countess, anticipating her, boldly faced the obstacle, and, as Don Aquilino did not know his part, or did not wish to play it, she rose with ill-concealed contempt, and approached the desk.

"As I see," she said, "that there is a desire to obstruct a work of charity—why, I neither know nor seek to know—it is necessary for me to assume the responsibility."

At this, Stella gathered up her courage, and without lifting her head, began: "Pardon me if I am the cause of displeasure, but if anybody has said anything evil of me, do not believe him, for charity's sake! I am poor, I am deserted; but I never have done wrong. My poor mother has had many misfortunes; I lost my father more than three years ago; one of my brothers is no longer at home with us; the other—they have taken him to prison. And we have remained without anybody. Oh, if I may work here and earn something for my mamma I shall be content. But do not believe, for the love of God, that I have done any wrong; it is something I cannot bear to hear you say, because it is not true."

Don Aquilino shook his head, a little surprised that the girl had the courage to speak thus, a little uneasy to see how readily the poor dupe had allowed herself to be dragged to this fate. But her words had possibly pierced the thick shell of the Superior. Putting aside her project of opposing what she called an intrusion, she assumed a more serene expression and answered:

"As it is you who implore me, my child, I will not put forward certain difficulties, which I nevertheless would have the right to suggest. I only pray the Countess, first of all, that she will deign to listen to my special wish; the rules give me the right, and I am responsible for the well-being of the establishment. In the meanwhile, having heard the excellent wish of this young girl,

and for no other reason—note that well! for no other reason—I waive for the time being the lack of requisitions and papers, such as the written consent of the mother and the guardian, and further”—

“Calm yourself, Mother Eleutaria,” answered the Countess, stung to the quick; “everything will be done as you wish; nothing will be lacking, I tell you, even though this girl who presents herself before you is received with no wrong-doing on her conscience. Pardon me, but for the rest, very serious reasons, impossible for me to communicate to you, demand that this girl, without loss of an hour, shall be placed in refuge here.”

“Now,” answered the Superior, “I understand; only since I am not allowed to know how things stand, I must wash my hands of the affair, and I will not hold myself responsible for any consequence.”

“Yes, yes, leave the responsibility to others! And you, Don Aquilino, lose no time; put upon the register the name and condition of this young girl, and this date, and everything else will be ratified and put in proper order, with all the attestations, documents, and recapitulations that the Mother Superior or you yourself, Don Aquilino, could require.”

“I obey whoever has a right to command me,” the priest humbly stammered. And with a trembling hand, as if he were writing his own condemnation, he began to cover with his big coarse characters a page of that book which contained the names of all the refugees. He delayed over his work, hoping, but vainly, that some unexpected obstacle might arise. The women let him alone, and before he had finished, Stella, with the permission of the lady patroness, was conducted by the other old woman into the interior of the house.

The girls of the Retreat were issuing from the little refectory, at the moment when their new sister came to meet them. She found herself among perhaps twenty young women, poorly dressed, the most of whom, with-

out taking any notice of her, disbanded at once to rush to the basement room, in which they were allowed to spend an hour after dinner before returning to work or to study. Two or three eyed her curiously, and whispered together. She remained in a corner, alone and abashed. She had hoped to find herself among kind sisters, who would cheer her, who would ask about her mother and her misfortunes; but nobody saluted her, nobody said a word to her. Willingly would she have broken down and wept, but her heart beat so violently as to suffocate her sobs.

That same evening, in the cabinet of the Countess Cunegonda, the warmest congratulations were exchanged over this reported victory against the secular party. Father Apollinaris and Count Alberigo moralized on the necessity of zeal in the reform of the customs of the lower classes. The Countess and two of her noble friends, both fellow patronesses of the Retreat, praised one another for their success in carrying their point while maintaining appearances. Everybody agreed that it was important to keep the matter a secret—because there were persons that might look upon it from the wrong point of view—and to fight down the scandal by presenting a good example.

That same evening, at about the same hour, the Illustrissimo, returning home from the theater earlier than usual, alighted from his carriage, and retired at once to his own apartment. Rosso preceded him with great importance, and held himself in readiness, at a wink, to prepare him for bed; but, contrary to his rule, the master began a conversation with his faithful servant, as if to distract his mind, and asked him certain questions which might have raised strange suspicions in anybody else. But Rosso systematically paid attention only to actions, so that evening he perceived only that the Illustrissimo was in a bad temper.

"Tell me, isn't it a long time since I last saw Omobono?"

"I don't know—a fortnight perhaps."

"It seems impossible! Well, I am not I, if I haven't begun to see pretty clearly what is going on. Curse them all!"

"Calm yourself, Illustrissimo, calm yourself! Mind you, they understand one another only too well."

"Silence!"

Meanwhile the noble lord had stretched himself out in a chair. Rosso raised the curtains and prepared the bed. After a silence the gentleman asked, warily:

"Have you heard anything new?"

"No, Illustrissimo."

"Tell me, do you know the family of a certain widow—the widow of one of Napoleon's soldiers?"

"Wait! Perhaps you mean the one who lives in the house near the Piazza Fontana?"

"I think so. Do you know anything about them?"

"No, Signor; why?"

"I had undertaken to help that family, and I am told that there are other people of rank who, purposely to antagonize me, have gone to work—And you have heard nothing?"

"May I die, Illustrissimo, if I know anything."

"Eh! I see that you too are losing your wits. I don't recognize you any longer."

"I beg pardon, Signor?"

"Never mind! I will show the canoness and all the rest of the party that I laugh at them—ha! ha!"

"I feel reassured at seeing you laugh, Signor."

"Enough! You can go now. To-morrow, at an early hour, you will pass by Signor Omobono's house; he is to come here in the morning without fail, and say not a word to anybody. To the Councilor you will take the message I gave you. Have you understood?"

"Do not doubt it, Illustrissimo."

Meanwhile, the Illustrissimo had got into bed. But, raising himself on his elbow, he continued: "Pour the usual dose into the cup. That's another impostor—the doctor!"

"I should like to see you more quiet," said Rosso, with a grin which he would fain have passed off for a smile.

"Yes, yes! Well, go away. Draw the curtains, shut the door. Remember what I have told you!"

"Good night, Illustrissimo."

And the valet, as he departed, pondered as to what could have so greatly disturbed his master that he had spoken words so full of wrath.

"Whatever it be, he has need of me," he murmured, "and if to-day he does me wrong, to-morrow he will have the grace to draw a sovereign from his pocket to make it up to me."

Having locked the door of the apartment he went off to sleep, leaving the Illustrissimo alone in the company of his bad temper.

CHAPTER XXXV

AN INNOCENT PRISONER

THE cell in which Damiano awaited his trial was a damp little room in the basement, looking out on the prison yard, from behind a high brown wall. A few square windows, double-barred, opened in the wall, half hidden behind an inclined board partition which shut out all light save only such glimmer from heaven as could be caught through breathing-holes of this sort. The cell was in common, and for lack of accommodations whoever might be brought into this hapless place was liable to be exposed to a ribald crew of every class, between whose members there was rarely any peace.

Damiano, shut up at first in the common jail, often saw the sun rising and setting from its windows, and he suffered cruelly in those days. Over his head hung a grave accusation: he was described as the principal instigator of the riot on St. Christopher's Day. Not only had he resisted the public authorities, but he had been caught in the act of holding a deadly weapon in his hand. It behooved the authorities to spend some time in inquiries, to verify the facts, to examine witnesses and bystanders, before it could be determined whether a criminal process should be established against the accused.

By good luck, the firm aspect of the young artisan, the simplicity with which he explained the episode, and the concordant testimony of several persons who, without taking part in the affray, were witnesses thereto, soon discredited the intricate and malicious depositions made by those who had hoped to destroy Damiano. The judge, whose business it was to expedite the processes of justice, but who had really stirred up a wasp's nest, suspected that the young man might be the victim of some conspiracy, and this suspicion was confirmed by certain words dropped with ostentatious indifference by certain persons who could greatly influence his future. But he, whose worth and talent, despite his youth, were fully equal to the honorable care of his magisterial office, recoiled from the premises that he imagined were being insinuated; and, employing the shrewdness and good intention of a wise and honest intelligence, he soon knew the truth, though he could not legally establish the facts.

But, of all the accused, none remained in jail except poor Damiano. The others, as there were no legal reasons for detaining them, were remanded, with an admonition to present themselves when they were summoned before the regular examination. This determination was taken after a person high in authority had learned that Martigny the fencing-master was implicated in this case—a man indispensable in the world of fashionable fops.

As soon as the judge had convinced himself of Damiano's truthfulness, he ordered that he should be separated from the other prisoners and treated with every possible consideration. Moreover, he did what he could to bring the case to speedy trial, but unforeseen circumstances to prevent this seemed to arise every time.

Fully two months elapsed while the persecuted youth had been expecting the recognition of his innocence. They seemed to him two years, and at the remembrance of his early days, at the thought of the wretched poverty in which he imagined his family must be plunged, a suffocating wrath burned at his heart, a shudder of the will, constrained to consume itself in expectation, and sometimes he felt a confused delirium, and uttered maledictions on life and on virtue. Alone, always alone, in the presence of the dark future, threatened with infamy, oppressed with the memories of the last three years, conscious of his own innocence, a victim to the vengeance of too powerful enemies and to the delay of justice, Damiano saw day alternate with night, but heard no voice that told him to hope. So within himself he felt his courage die—courage, the last companion of the innocent.

Then, thinking over those illusions in which he had wandered for so long he broke into curses against men, against himself, against Providence, and, shaking the bars, he asked Heaven why he had been condemned to live, and experienced a horrid temptation to end it all by dashing his head against those iron bolts. Sometimes memories of his dying father came back to him, thoughts of his mother, of the deserted Stella, and his face was bathed in tears. He fancied then that haply the soul of his father in heaven, and those two innocent souls on earth, were praying for him, who could not pray; that perhaps the Lord had not forgotten him. But usually an invincible dejection, a calm despair, prostrated mind and body.

One day the far-off and melancholy song of another

prisoner came to his ears. He could not distinguish the words, but, self-deceived, he fancied he recognized the voice of Giovanni, his companion in that sad affair on St. Christopher's Day. Fearing that perhaps the poor Giovanni had, through him, lost bread and liberty, he felt his own agony increase. For the first time since he had found himself here, he fell on his knees, lifted up his voice to God and prayed. In praying he felt a consolation so pure, so sweet, that he was fain to think that one who had faith in virtue should never curse, nor despair, nor let himself be conquered by adversity—for justice is ever the same, and truth never can fail.

But then he asked himself how it happened that no one ever came to see him, that no one remembered him. At least they might have brought him news of his family. It seemed to him impossible that no one should have taken the pains to obtain for him, if nothing else, an early decision in the case, or endeavored to see him, to send him a word, a greeting. He felt repugnant to making a friend of the jailer, the only person who might have been able to serve him; nevertheless one morning he resigned himself to the humiliation, and asked the man whether he would be willing to take a message to his family.

The jailer answered promptly in the negative. He added that he was an incorruptible employé, that all the gold in the world would not tempt him to betray his duty. Then, coming to terms with his conscience, he turned to the prisoner, and without another word significantly placed the ball of his thumb upon that of his index finger. Damiano knew not how to answer. He turned away his eyes. He had nothing to give. With a disdainful "Ouf!" and a shrug of the shoulder, the man turned on his heel.

Damiano resigned himself to the inevitable, hoping from day to day that he might be summoned to the presence of the judge for trial, and be acquitted. He

did not suspect what imputations were being made against him by underhand methods, through purchased testimony. He did not guess that he was accused of nothing less than inciting to riot and armed resistance to the authorities. But the accusations of infamous persons, with their perfidious inventions of so-called facts, did not weigh against the precise words of the law and the firmness of a wise judge. The latter was ever more and more convinced that the accused had been forcibly dragged into this trouble by some intrigue to which he could not find the key. He was glad to find, however, in the development of the case that he would not be obliged, as at first he had feared he might be, to send him before the criminal court. The good magistrate was not one of those who do all they can to make a paragraph in the penal code apply to the lightest case.

It was a night in August. The air was still. The sky was encumbered with black clouds which passed slowly over the moon. There was a sultriness, a quiet in the atmosphere, as when a storm is brewing.

Damiano had thrown himself upon his hard cot, but he found neither rest nor sleep. His thoughts never had been darker or sadder than they were that night, and he felt as if he were surrounded by strange phantoms, and as they crept closer and closer, they grew into giants. He heard strange voices in the distance, and scornful laughs, and a terror never felt before seemed to suffocate him.

A little later the noise of thunder broke out in the distance, and sharp and rapid flashes of lightning illumined the outer darkness and stirred the air, and little drops of rain blew against the walls and into the barred windows of the prison. He jumped from his bed and ran to the bars of the opening to breathe the agitated air. The war of the unchained elements seemed to draw him back to gladness and to life.

Little by little the wind died away, the moon showed its face once more behind the thinning clouds, the skies cleared, the air grew fresh and pure. Tender thoughts, dim but ever dear memories revived and chased away Damiano's wrathful longings for revenge. He drew back from the window, and sitting on the edge of the sack which served him for a pillow, he gave himself up to melancholy fancies.

"What is life?" he said to himself. "It is like the day that has passed—like this night, first a storm, then a calm. It is for us to choose one of two paths, that of good or that of evil. Why is it that I, who have asked so little from the world, I, who desire nothing but faith and love, have not been able to secure a peaceful and honest lot on earth? Still, I understand it. I do wrong in cursing those who have done me harm. Even now, even here, I would not change my life for theirs. How is it that although they have robbed me of my liberty, and forced me to remain in poverty, unless I were willing to become a base scoundrel, how is it that I feel myself stronger, more secure than they? How is it that I repent of having wished them evil, and now rather compassionate them, and almost pardon them?"

After a period of calm reflection, his thoughts grew more distinct. Not even now could he express them fully, but he felt them strongly.

"Ah! It is true," he said. "It must be that those who do not sell their lives, who pass through the world in honesty and sincerity, and bear with them to the last day the same heart the Lord has given them—it must be that these people, if they have no other recompense, have that at least of being able to say, 'We are content with having done our duty.' And I—can I say so? Now I see that in those years that have passed away so quickly I may have betrayed the trust confided to me, I may have believed too much in myself and in others! But at least if I was rash and imprudent, if I lacked

worldly experience, I have done nothing with evil intent, nor to harm others. I only claimed the right of making them keep to themselves, the powerful ones who stood in my path, and I always told the truth. Then what did I find? Men who fell upon me as if I were a wild brute!

"Content with the first honest bread I had won by my own toil, I have known some happy days. But now what will happen to my poor mother, and to Stella? Who will think of them, who will protect them, if those who think they can buy honesty with gold should turn to them in their loneliness? I think that Signor Lorenzo, who has no fear of anyone, cannot have abandoned them. And the Lord, as he gives me strength enough to await the day appointed by Him, is He not also their protector?"

He tried to hope that, despite his imprisonment, his dear ones were living as ever in modest and obscure peace, without other grief than to have to await the moment when he should return to their arms.

"Oh, my dreams, oh, my hopes of old!" he continued, "where are you? When I was only ten years old I found a companion whom I loved so much that I hoped to pass all my life with him. My heart even then began to beat at the thought of those things which seemed to me great and beautiful! I remember those evenings when, sitting on my father's knees, I hung breathlessly upon his words when he told me of the times of the republic, the first battles of the Cisalpines, and repeated the name of Bonaparte! I was bursting with delight, proud that my father had played a part in those wars of giants. Poor father! he died unknown, forgotten! Only to us did he leave his ancient honor! When I used to escape from the house, and in the silence of the deserted cathedral, which seemed to me so vast, so mysterious, I wandered around as if lost among those columns and altars, or sat at the foot of a monument, I felt trou-

bled in soul, I knew not why! It was there that, one day in autumn, I had sat down not far from the altar of Saint Thecla, to contemplate that ancient picture of the Annunciation, that picture which, in its religious simplicity of expression, I found so beautiful, so true! Suddenly a long ray of a thousand colors, penetrating one of the stained-glass windows, fell upon the picture, and illuminated it with such magic light that I thought I saw an apparition. At that moment, for the first time, came into my mind the thought that if there was to be any happiness for me on earth, it would be that of one day painting a picture as beautiful as that. It was only a dream—I see it now, but in the remembrance I could almost weep. Patience! all is not yet lost.”

In thoughts like these Damiano passed the greater part of that summer night. Between anger and discomfort, love and the unforgettable memories of the past, and the persuasion that he must accept the life given him by the Lord to obtain peace and hope in the right, he lived over again in those few hours all the emotions that had agitated his obscure life. After all that internal battle, his soul found repose. He lay down upon his sack of straw, slept tranquilly the rest of the night, and when he awoke the sun was already high in the heavens.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE VOICE OF A FRIEND

HP and down the narrow passageway between the cells, in one of which Damiano lay, a soldier, put on sentry duty at noon, had been pacing for nearly an hour. Either because he was weary of the business, or had something on his mind, he halted frequently and put his ear to the door of the different cells; then, as if impatient to return to the open,

he approached a little grated window, which admitted hardly a streak of light into the passage, and looked into the courtyard, where prisoners, jailers and guards were walking to and fro. Turning back, he would pause on the landing of the inside stairway and look up, with a certain air of expectation, as if awaiting somebody. At last he exclaimed under his breath:

"It is true that for a comrade one must close an eye, as they say, because one hand washes the other. That I know, but if he delays any longer, I don't know how the matter will turn out."

At that very moment, a step was heard on the stair, and a young man, a soldier also, appeared above, looked around to see whether he were spied upon, and then came down to his comrade.

"Is it you?"

"Don't you see me?"

"Come, now, don't lose a moment. I have given you my word that I would let you do as you wished, but I have almost repented."

"Ah, you are a good fellow, Maldura, you are a true friend; and we have known bad days together. But, tell me, have you been able to discover the whereabouts of the man I want?"

"I squeezed a word or two out of that cursed jailer, and if I don't mistake, that is the door over there."

"Good!"

"But be quick, for heaven's sake; I don't want to stand at the short chain, for love of you."

"Oh, you make too much of this; I only wish to speak a word to a friend; believe me, you are helping in a work of Christian charity."

Hardly had they exchanged these few words, in a low tone, when the last comer, approaching the barred door that his companion had pointed out, leaned down and shoved under it a folded paper which he took out of the sleeve of his topcoat.

Damiano, only too well accustomed to the monotonous tramp of the sentinel, had heard nothing of what had passed between the soldiers. He was not looking at the door, but was standing, occupied with his own thoughts. A light touch on the door made him turn round. Without any idea of what it could be, he ran to pick up the paper, and opened it. There were but two lines painfully traced upon rough paper, big black characters that looked more like pothooks than letters. But Damiano understood all, the moment he held it in his hand. As he deciphered the first word he trembled, turned pale, and glanced up at the door. He heard nothing further there. He read on, and by putting in a letter here and there was able to decipher this message:

"Remember, Damiano, that you are not alone. Rocco has returned; and if he dies for it he will do something for you."

He had not yet finished reading when the tap at the door was repeated, and a voice he had not heard for a long time whispered: "Damiano!"

"God in heaven! Is it you, Rocco?"

Almost beside himself, he leaped to the bolted door as if he would throw himself into the arms of his friend. The good Rocco, standing on the other side, was delighted at his success in making himself known, and sought everywhere for some crack through which he might behold the face of his Damiano.

"Damiano," he whispered, "who could have thought that I should find you here? It's a scoundrelly trick they have played upon you! Providence sent me here. I have a heart—you know it. And for you"—

The prisoner felt too moved to answer; his thoughts were confused and weighed heavily on his heart. He knew not what to say to this man who was more to him than a friend, more than a brother, who had sacrificed himself for his sake. He felt that he could only clasp him to his heart. And even that was impossible.

"Damiano!" Rocco continued; "as this confounded door will not allow me to see you, speak to me! Tell me that you are pleased with me, that you wish me well. I have so many things to tell you."

"Rocco! my Rocco!" began Damiano, almost weeping, "you are a hundred times better than I. The Lord must love you, because He has given you a heart such as no one else has in the world. But I—what can I do in return for what you have done for me?"

"Stop that kind of talk; there is much to think about. I have only a quarter of an hour to remain near you. An old comrade of mine, Maldura, who is on guard here, has let me do the trick. Oh, I shall tell you all, but first tell me where is Mamma Teresa? Do you know? And she—my guardian angel!"

"Rocco, have you not seen them? Don't you know anything about them? I have been shut up here for two months; I know nothing about anybody. And I have done no wrong, it was all an accident."

"And you, too, know nothing of your family?"

"Why do you talk in that way? Haven't you tried to find them? Haven't you seen them? Weren't you at the house?"

"I have been there three times in the last two days, for you must know I arrived here at the beginning of the week, with a company they were sending back to the country. I have seen Margherita, your neighbor, and it was she who told me that Mother Teresa had moved away, and that, as to you, some time ago, on a Sunday, they had put you here."

"Oh, Rocco, in what a moment do we meet again!"

"What do you say? Don't worry; don't think of sad things. There is a remedy for everything, when our hearts and consciences are clear."

"It seems impossible! It is a miracle out of the sky! But, Rocco, how do you happen to be here? It is barely twenty months since the time when your great heart

prompted you to take my place as a soldier, and yet you have been able to return?"

"I have said that it's a long story. I shall willingly tell it to you some time; you are right in saying it is a miracle that I am here. Curse the door that stands between us! I wish so much to embrace you, and to be near you and tell you my story."

"Don't go away; talk on, tell me about yourself. It is the first voice I have heard for two months, the first that I feel in my own heart—and it is yours, Rocco!"

"You are always the same, Damiano, thanks be to heaven! I will be close by, if the jailer doesn't drive me away. He has a good heart, that Maldura, and if we could do everything that we wished to do—Enough! that is not what we must think of at present. Listen, Damiano! I am no longer the Rocco of the past, whom everybody abused. I have learned a little sense, which means that I have begun to put little faith in men, but I have not paid them back in the same coin that has come to me! It was a damnable life out there, in those Lutheran countries. We were on the borders of Turkey, and it was no small task to keep back those turbaned devils. They earn their living in that country by breaking into stables, and carrying away beasts and hay and everything. And we poor fellows were sent out there to do penance for our sins! One night, in winter—it is always winter there—I, with seven of our boys, was making the rounds on a section at the frontier; there was no street, and we sank to our thighs in mud and snow. Some, for comfort, had lighted their pipes, when suddenly a score of those renegade dogs were upon us and we were ready for them! It was a fine moment for warming up! We let go all together at a venture, but we saw them jump upon the horses, and they disappeared into the night like the wind. But one of them, as he was escaping, turned around, fired, and hit me! I lay there on the ground like a log; then Mal-

dura raised me, and he and a comrade took me away and left me in the hospital, and I knew nothing more for a while. In a month, when God willed it, I was on my feet again, but the bullet of that infernal Turk had gone into my arm, and your Rocco was no longer fit for military exercises. Nevertheless I thanked heaven, thinking I had gained five years and would be sent back home."

"Rocco, Rocco!"

Thus in a low but piercing voice Damiano cried to his friend. The latter could not tear himself away from that side of the door against which he was leaning.

"Rocco! you have done all this for me!" said Damiano.

"Yes, yes, but now I must leave you and run away."

"Don't go so soon!"

"But Maldura calls me away; his watch is finished, and he is right. But leave everything in my hands. I will return; I will give you an account of everything."

"Ah, yes; I want to know where are my mother and my sister. Go, go, good Rocco, lose no time! May the Lord accompany you!"

"Damiano, I wouldn't have missed this hour for anything in the world."

The two soldiers departed. Damiano strained his ear to catch the last sound of their footsteps; then, when everything was silent, he clasped his hands, looked up to heaven, and his thoughts rose with faith to the Lord.

Still the days and the weeks passed, and Damiano heard nothing further of Rocco or of his family. This uncertainty was a mortal agony for him. Returning to the gloom and despair of the past, he fell ill. The prison doctor, the second time that he saw him, felt sympathy for him; and, persuaded that his sickness proceeded mainly from the uncertainty which oppressed him, he ventured to speak about him to the judge who was conducting the inquiry. The latter, a just and kindly man,

so managed it that in two days the matter was despatched, for which two months had not sufficed.

And Damiano, as soon as he had risen, was taken from the jail and conducted into the presence of the authorities. After many serious admonitions as to his future, he was told that he was at liberty, as the indictment had been quashed for lack of legal proof.

CHAPTER XXXVII

A BROTHER TO HUMANITY

THE Abbé Theodore, one of the chaplains of the Maggiore Hospital, one fine autumn day was walking along the street that flanks the canal in the city, between the bridge of the Tosa gate and that of the Romana gate, and had reached the spot known as the Naviglio of the Hospital. It was only a short walk, for he was on his way to the dreary little rooms that served him for a home in that vast edifice, where every year thousands of the poor of Milan, and of the surrounding country, go to die. He was not old. He was tall and slightly bent; his pallid features were firmly sculptured; his eyes were thoughtful and nearly always half veiled by their lids; his step was rapid, as that of a person who wishes to arrive quickly at his destination, and an occasional gesture by which he seemed to be responding to some inner emotion, showed that he was a man who knew life and its sorrows, and who, strong in body and in mind, wished to fulfil here below the part allotted to him.

He was a just and wise priest, who loved obscurity and the humble courage of a life of sacrifice and kindness. When he came out of the seminary he was already numbered as one of the elect of the younger ecclesiastics, both for his theological and his civil learning. He might

easily have aspired to some envied dignity, or to the fame of a sacred orator. Instead, he had chosen a perilous post, little coveted, almost unknown to the world, that of spiritual coadjutor in the service of the sick poor in the Maggiore Hospital. And there, where better than anyone else, he knew how to carry words of consolation and truth, he had lived for seven years, modestly, unknown to the world as on the day when he had first entered there, but blessed as a father rather than as a friend by all the unfortunates he had encouraged in their suffering and their death, through whom he learned to know and to love the great human family. He was the friend of a few other priests, and of some wise and honest young men who gladly came to visit him across the melancholy bridge which stands near the courtyard of the hospital. He passed his days in the willing and sublime abnegation of self, doing good everywhere, content if there remained to him an hour which he might consecrate to some infirm widow, surrounded by a crowd of children, or to some old man, poor and shy, languishing upon straw in an attic, or an artisan whom fever had deprived of work; and among these he was accustomed to share the fruit of his little benefice.

That day, Abbé Theodore, more preoccupied than usual, walked home, with slow and unequal steps, thinking on the sad case of a poor mother whom he had assisted in her last agony. She had died of slow and painful consumption, leaving behind her ten children, three boys, the eldest of whom was fourteen, and seven wretched little girls, nearly all suffering from scrofula or rickets, who could look for little assistance from their father, a maker of straw seats for chairs, already exhausted himself with years and privations. The thought that in this proud and splendid city of Milan many other families were languishing like this, for whom the city's charity could not suffice, the remembrance that he also was the last of a numerous family of the humbler class-

es, that he had seen his father and mother die prematurely, and his brothers and sisters scattering themselves at hazard through the world, multiplying the number of the unhappy—these and other still bitterer thoughts had gathered a dark cloud around the brow of the good coadjutor.

The Abbé Theodore had reached the corner of an ancient wall. Before turning into the Via St. Barnabas, he drew his cloak around him, and lifting his eyes, became aware of the presence of a man who was coming toward him with wavering steps, stumbling and vainly endeavoring to keep close to the wall. Though it was already dusk he could see the man by the light of the street-lamp. His broken hat was crushed down upon his head, he was covered with rags, was struggling against the fumes of wine, and sawing the air with gesticulations of his right hand, in wrathful and blasphemous mood. The priest noticed also that under the other arm the man held something wrapped up in an old quilt, whose edges trailed on the ground, and he heard him swearing in a broken voice which sounded more distinct as he approached. Evidently he was not conscious of being seen.

"Curse it!" the stranger was saying. "Man and reason are two things! I am a poor devil, I am not a man." And here he uttered a shriek of laughter. "Hunger—what does it matter? She is an ugly witch—hunger! Why, let's drown it in a cask of good wine. That's what I do; when I am hungry, I drink. Hurrah for logic!"

These words sent a shudder through the coadjutor. He would have liked to know, however, what it was that this poor wretch was carrying, and would have accosted him, but he was withheld by the horror of seeing the soul, the breath of God, brutalized and made vile in one of His creatures.

"Ah, well," resumed the drunkard, "and how about my woman? I left her weeping in the corner and saying

her litany, and I went off to drink up there. Listen, Signor Host—you are the only one I call Signor—do you hear? My woman has given me another child; I must find a godfather for it. Wouldn't that cooper do that you know? No? Patience! There's the big house over there, for nobody's children, Providence thinks. It's a great and beautiful invention of Providence! Cheerfulness in the house! Quick, then, mine host of the mouth of hell—another wee drop! Take this poor little cripple, and bring that brandy of 'thirteen!"

As the ragged drunkard passed him, the priest realized that the torn quilt trailing behind was wrapped around a new-born child, which, suffocated perhaps by the paternal arm that tightly encircled it, let forth a wail.

"Silence, daughter of misery!" cried the man, closing his eyes and passing his right hand over the head of the little innocent. "Have you already learned from your mother how to weep? That woman has already given me five of your sort, and if it were not for the saint that protects little doves, I know what I would do with you. Silence! or they'll hear you, and I'll have to take you back again."

The child resumed its wailing. The unnatural father then broke out into other objurgations more crazy than ferocious, and the horrified priest started to run back and seize the child from him, thus possibly to prevent a cruel mishap. But the man, scenting pursuit, redoubled his pace, and reached the door to that wheel which in the hours of darkness opens to receive the sacred deposit of so many unhappy women, whom poverty or sin forbids to bear the most beautiful name in all languages. There he halted, cast a glance around, as does the prey that scents the huntsman, and, swaying to and fro, barely succeeded in depositing his bundle in the dark opening. Then, unable to restrain a howl of joy, he hurried back toward the bridge, and began singing a ribald tavern-song, which he interspersed with screams.

Shocked by this sorrowful scene, but relieved from the fear he had felt for the unfortunate babe, the Abbé Theodore, seeing she was safe, retraced his steps, and, more melancholy than ever, entered the Hospital by the door near the head of the bridge.

The good priest who, at the end of each day, was wont to bless the Lord for having given him an opportunity to dry a few tears or to pour into an immortal soul the balm of a pure hope, accompanied by some of those words which restore man to himself, the good priest bore at that moment such a bitterness in his heart that he felt more keenly than ever the emptiness of all things human, and doubting almost of himself, he experienced an ineffable desire to repair to the peace of the sanctuary. Entering the little church of the Hospital, he threw himself on his knees. And in praying for that wretched man and his child, his thought lifted itself to the source of every pure sentiment and every truth—to God.

Contemplating the great benefactions of Providence, he felt remorse for his sadness and his doubts of a moment before.

He went out of the church, turned to the left, and, through the portico of the larger court, passed into the most ancient part of the edifice, that which was built by Francesco Sforza. Having climbed a private staircase, he found himself in the two rooms which were his home in that habitation of sadness and death.

The poor babe whom a little while ago he had seen abandoned on the first day of her life, recalled to his mind, by a not unnatural association of ideas, a far-away memory, the melancholy memory of an episode which had long weighed upon his heart, and to which, in spite of all his efforts, he never had been able to find the missing clue.

On reaching his bare room, the Abbé lighted his lamp, and felt inside a drawer of his desk, which, laden with books and papers, stood under the window; thence he

drew out a small bundle. The seal of the envelope was broken, but a bit of twine, the ends of which were secured with sealing-wax, bound it fast. He sat down by the desk, took out some of the papers, and began to read.

The first of the papers that he selected from the others, as the most important and the most precious, was a copy of an old "act of exposition" made from the records of the Asylum of St. Catharine of the Wheel; wherein, besides the name that might happen to be sent in with the foundling, were inscribed all other facts that might serve to establish its identity.

This act bore at its head a dove with an olive branch in its beak, a pious emblem of the peace of the Saviour, while below, stuck on like a seal, was a torn picture of St. Anna, which had been found upon the child:

The sixteenth day of

No. 183

October, 1811.

1811.

At the Foundling Asylum of Saint Catherine of the Wheel.

*Name: Rocco R * * **

Age: Years——months——days, two.

Found in the wheel last night.

At the hour of 8.45 P. M.

Clothed in

Underwear (3) of fine cloth trimmed with lace.

Upper garments (2) quilted with blue percale.

Swaddling-clothes (1) fine.

Hood (1) of embroidered muslin faced with blue silk.

Pillow (1) with white cambric cover.

Shirt (1) of heavy cloth, marked in red cotton with the letter E.

A little Agnus-dei of white and black cloth, embroidered in white silk with an I. H. S.

He was baptized the 16th day of October, 1811.

Besides this document, over which the priest hurriedly glanced, were several letters of various dates, without

any signatures. From these he carefully withdrew one less torn and without superscription. Here and there a word had been erased; the writing was blurred and blotted, but the contents were the true expression of a most unfortunate soul. In re-reading it the good priest now and then hid his face in his hands, and tears came to his eyes. This letter ran as follows:

“Sir:

“If a poor woman who has lost everything in this world—virtue, health, honor, and almost life itself—deserves compassion, do not refuse at least to listen to what may be my last words. You know what I was, and to what I am reduced; I blame no one for my disgrace except myself; but I have wept so much, I have prayed so much, that I hope God may pardon me, and you too. It is three years since I began to die, and in all that time you would see me no more, nor hear of me. Still, if you knew what I have suffered, you would not let me finish thus with desperation in my heart. A poor woman who has no other hope, no other comfort in her sin, save a word, a name, which she never can hear pronounced by her child, lives in misery in the corner of an attic hidden from the eyes of all, and now without strength to raise herself from her bed of sorrow. This woman deserves the state to which she has been reduced, because she let herself be deceived, betrayed, because she betrayed her own duties; but they have taken her child from her, they snatched him from her arms when he was just born, giving her to understand that he would soon be restored to her. She held her peace, bent her head, and wept. The poor wretch had no longer a father or a mother, or anyone else in the world. For a month she had been envied, happy, surrounded with illusions, adorned with flowers and veils, like a poor victim for the slaughter. Then she was banished, alone, to shame and infamy, fearful alike of life and of death.

What was left to her save to throw herself, without further thought, into the abyss that yawned before her? Still, she found some little strength in herself, and the thought of this little innocent, the fruit of her sin whom you had cursed—this thought proved her salvation. Then she had the faith to live only for him, to kneel before him, to find in his love that forgiveness which she dared not ask from God. She waited three years and she is still waiting. But now there is no more time; the tremendous day is approaching, and God will soon have done counting my tears. Oh, at least, may He not find them few in comparison with my sin!

"If any memory of the past remains with you, do not despise the prayer of a poor dying woman. I am not praying for myself, but for my child; may he, at least, not have to bear through life the burden of a knowledge of his birth; may he never curse the memory of his mother! After seeking long for him, I learned that he was still alive, not far from here, but in a place where it would be impossible for me to reach him. In this terrible moment, I willingly renounce the hope of seeing him even for once; may God take account of my sacrifice! But one thought, one remorse, which never leaves me, is the fear that he, born in ignominy, growing up in poverty, may some day enter the path of vice and crime. Oh, my God! let him at least live and die innocent, that he may be saved, even if I die in despair. Pardon me, O Lord! pardon me through him!

"The pain of writing this long letter has exhausted the little breath that remained; now there is nothing for me to do here below. Who knows whether the good priest, who came to comfort my heart with thoughts of religion, who spoke to me of the infinite mercy of God, and sustained me through this my last day, will not take it upon himself to bring you these words from a poor creature whom you probably have long forgotten. Listen to this man of God who will come to remind you of

my name—the name of one who in a few hours will be dead. He will recommend my son to you. Ah, you will provide enough at least for him to lead an honest and obscure life, I conjure you, by all you hold sacred! Remember that we all have to die, and that our every good action is recorded in heaven. Men may not know, but God knows who is the father of my child. Oh, if I had the consolation of ending in the certainty that that innocent will not be abandoned by everybody, I would bless God that I die so soon, at twenty-five, without having tasted an hour of happiness! But so be it! You will help me, and not rob me of all faith and all hope.

“Marianna.”

When he had read this the Abbé wiped his eyes and sighed.

“I seem still to see that unfortunate woman, lying on a sack on the ground, trembling all over, and with hardly strength enough to weep. It was a rainy day in March. Poor woman! She died resigned. But that powerful gentleman, who forced a laugh when I was speaking to him, who refused to listen to me when I ventured to describe that scene—it seems to me only yesterday. ‘Signor Abbé,’ he said, ‘you are assuming a tone which is not to be used toward certain people. In truth, I do not know what you are talking about. And after all, why be so fastidious about things that happen every day? Such is the way of the world.’ It is well that I am not accustomed to consider myself vanquished so soon! I returned to the charge, and he raised his voice, but I talked louder than he, and at last he humbled himself a little, and promised that he would do something. What a man!”

Here he took up another paper, and as if to keep in touch with the thoughts that had occupied him, he ran his eye over it. This paper, addressed to himself, was as follows:—

"Reverend Sir:

"I have orders to pass into your most honored hands the sum of six thousand (6,000) Milanese lire, to be invested for the purpose and in the method which you know. Of this sum you may dispose, how and when seems best to you, for the benefit of the person in whom you recently interested the illustrious Signor * * *. The said gentleman declares, however, as he has already declared to you, that he intends to assume no obligation toward that person, considering this amount as *purely* a simple and gracious donation.

"I am honored in sending you this advice by a special messenger, and shall await your pleasure, reverend sir, as to the payment of the sum indicated above. In the mean while, my dear sir, I sign myself, with the highest esteem,

"Your obliged and humble servant,
'M * * *, Attorney-at-Law."

At the bottom of the letter was a copy of the receipt for six thousand lire. The Abbé had transmitted the original to the nobleman, when he became fully persuaded that he could obtain nothing more for the orphan; and in this, as a minister of the Lord of forgiveness, he had formally accepted the miserable little inheritance. There was also a card from the State Treasury, which had accompanied the remittance of the last annual income of eighty florins. The priest, not knowing but that the child was still alive, wished to keep the pittance intact, believing it to be the property of his ward. So, in order to relieve the boy from financial straits, if fortune should ever favor his searches, Don Theodore had handed over the interest year by year to an honest notary in whom he confided; and, as twenty years had now passed, the little capital was doubled. In any case, he had decided that at his own death this money should be distributed among the poor. Acknowledgments of

the moneys, and the notary's receipts for the same, were all duly recorded and filed in scrupulous order.

It should be said that the Abbé Theodore had not lost all hope of discharging the sacred duty he had assumed, so that when he had replaced the papers he took up with some agitation a bundle of letters from the same drawer of the desk.

"Here," he soliloquized, glancing over them and reading here and there, mastered apparently by the thoughts that had dominated him all that evening, "here is the attestation of the Asylum, at the time when the child was consigned to a nurse in the country; here are the vouchers as to his supervision, signed by the parish priest, with which the peasants who boarded him would come to receive, twice a year, the small sum of money and the clothes which the house is accustomed to give. After 1819, when the child could not have been older than seven years, I find no further trace of him." He paused, and remained for a time in silent thought. "Oh, if *he* were not dead—that good parish priest, who was indeed the father of his flock, a man of sense and of heart, such as is needed in the country—perhaps I should know more. That excellent friend had succeeded in following the traces of the poor boy. He wrote to me: 'This poor child appeared to be devoid of intellect. The family that boarded him left him alone in the meadows all day long. More than once, I, myself, in making my rounds, have seen him seated on some little mound of earth, looking up at the sun; and I used to pity him. One day he was no longer seen in that neighborhood. I know, however, from one of my friends, a curate, that he took refuge for several nights in an outhouse in his parish. I have written to the authorities of that place and expect an answer.' And in this other letter he says: 'I do not think that he is dead, as you fear; however, I do not think you will find it easy to follow him in his sad pilgrimage. I have known for some months that a

lost boy, about fourteen years old, who might be he, was seen at * * * , a little place about twenty miles from here. If the Lord has not had pity upon him, if He has not yet freed him from the miseries of this earth, we should some time or other find trace of him. He may even have been shut up in an asylum as a derelict.' And a month later it was still he, who, coming to Milan, stopped here expressly to see me and told me, as I remember, 'I have hope of letting you know something of your unhappy orphan. I have discovered some very small indications which give me conjectures more probable than any that have been suggested so far. I will write at the earliest moment.' Those were his very words. But, after a few weeks, the good man was no more, and I did not know where to turn. These papers are still here, and my conscience still reproves me."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

MOTHER AND SON

JUST then, Don Theodore heard a light knock on his door. Divining who was there, he barely turned round from his desk, and asked:
"What is new?"

"Don Theodore, come at once to Number Thirty-one, ward of the Annunciation, to see an unfortunate woman who may not live until to-morrow."

So spoke an attendant entering the room. He was an old man, with a big cloak of green cloth, and an absurd little cap of the same color, which hardly protected his bald head. He was the head assistant in the female wards, a poor devil who had spent seventy years of his life between the walls of the Hospital, and those of the neighboring asylum for foundlings. In the latter place he himself, like so many children of nobody, had had his

own cradle and a goat for a wet-nurse, and afterward a bite of bread, before he had succeeded in getting employment first as an errand-boy and then as assistant. All his world was there. He had seen the sick and the wounded enter here, a few to go out again, cured, but the majority to die. Walking, with his hands behind his back, through the wards confided to his care, he had heard the laments of men and of women, of children and of the aged, who died all manner of deaths. It was all the same to him, a perfectly natural thing. He paid as much attention to them as does the head of an orchestra, before the rising of the curtain, to the tuning-up of the band. He would return to the poor man, departing well and hearty, the few clothes with which he had arrived with the same indifference that he showed in drawing the shroud over the face of one who had just rendered his soul to God. And withal the Ghezzo (for thus he was known to all because in his green clothes he resembled the lizard to which Lombards apply that name) was perhaps the most honest of all the hospital assistants. Though something of a grumbler, he was ever willing to second the wishes of his invalids or their visitors, where they did not run counter to his duty, and it was difficult to make him accept any money as compensation. The Ghezzo was an eccentric of a unique type. In that house of pain, in the midst of tribulation, he was everywhere, he gave ear to all lamentations, and though he answered them with a calm shrug of the shoulders, he would none the less perform the impossible, as the phrase runs, to aid those that depended on him.

"If poor devils do not help one another," he would say, "who will do anything for them?"

"Don Theodore," he repeated, seeing that the Abbé was unusually absent-minded. "Be quick, I say, if you wish to arrive in time."

"Go on before me," answered the other. "I will follow at once."

The Ghezze, taking the wax candle from the desk, preceded the priest, and they descended the stairs. They crossed the spacious courtyard, and mounted to the portico of the upper story bathed at that hour in the rays of the moon which shone brilliant and clear above the long dark line formed by the opposite side of the edifice.

At the moment when Don Theodore, turning the wing of the portico, entered the ward of the Annunciation, he saw appear at the other end of the portico, in the midst of the darkness, two lights and several persons. He understood that on that side another unfortunate was dying, and that another minister of the Lord was bringing him at that very moment the bread of the last journey. This sight recalled him to the sacred duty of his ministry. Forcing himself to drive away the external cares which had been harassing him, he lifted his thoughts to God, and prepared himself with more emotion than usual for the work of consolation and pardon to which he had been called.

They entered the long, silent ward. Seventy poor women, mothers, maidens, widows, and wives were languishing there, victims of the infinite number of fevers, consumptive and acute, which, under forms so diverse and so mutable, smite every year so large a number of the people. Those beds, not more than a foot apart, covered by counterpanes striped in white and blue, with a little crucifix at the head of each, those black tablets, inscribed with the name of the malady and the number of the patient's bed, the number given respectively to each on entering instead of a name which perhaps nobody would ever pronounce again on earth, all this sad scene, although it had long been continuously under his eyes, never before had seemed to him so sad, had never before gripped his heart-strings as it did in that hour.

Traversing the length of the ward, he glanced from side to side with pious sympathy at the women, who burning or shivering with fever, could find no rest, and

whose longing eyes seemed to be imploring him for a word of comfort, a benediction.

Presently he arrived at the bed numbered 31. He was surprised to see that at that late hour, contrary to the custom and the rigorous discipline of the place, two unknown persons were beside the bed, silent and self-absorbed in attitudes of profound affliction. Propped upon pillows to a semi-sitting posture, was a woman burdened with years, and so wasted that one would hardly have thought a human body lay there. At that moment the patient seemed to be oppressed by a sudden syncope. Her head was bent on her breast, her eyes were closed, and, encircled by the livid pallor of death, her mouth was half open, her breath apparently spent. The sole sign that life still remained in her was a convulsive trembling of the hands, with which she seemed by tremendous effort to be reaching out for something she could not find.

It was poor old Teresa. Near the great final passage, she was seeking for the hands of that son whom at least she had been able to see before dying.

The young man, dressed in shabby clothes, who stood by that bedside, pallid, erect, with fixed eyes, with arms crossed over his breast, was Damiano.

On the previous day, after emerging from prison, Damiano had walked, still weak and with disturbed mind, toward his home. Believing it impossible that everyone had forgotten him in this fashion, he knew not what to think of Rocco and Signor Lorenzo. He walked uncertainly and shamefacedly along the streets, as if he thought every one were looking at him and divining the fact that he had just come out of jail. But the thought that in a few moments he would be in the arms of his mother, that she and Stella knew him to be innocent, comforted him, gave him breath, made him forget all that had passed.

To reach the Piazza Fontana, he had taken the most

frequented street. Suddenly he heard himself called by name. At the sound of that voice he looked behind him, and saw Rocco running toward him.

The two friends met. After that long conversation, that exchange of memories and of strong affection, to which the doors of the prison-house had opposed themselves in vain, they at last saw each other again. Neither spoke at first; they looked mutely at each other with a warm clasp of hands.

"Listen, my Rocco! You can read my heart, can you not?"

"Oh, Damiano, let us leave all the rest now and talk of yourself—and of them."

"For three weeks I have been expecting you. After that day"—

"What must you have thought of me? Oh, if you only knew! I was there every day—two or three hours on duty, there in the courtyard, under your window, and I looked up in vain. I found nobody after Maldura left who would listen to me. Even this morning I returned there. If I had known that the hour of justice had arrived, you would have found me, on coming out, there at that door."

"Good Rocco! and I did you wrong!"

"They have at last understood the scoundrelly trick that was played upon you, then?"

"Don't let us talk about it now. Come, Rocco, give me your arm. I am feeble, almost undone, but I must see my mother."

"Stop a moment! Listen to me."

"How is this? You pull me back! That's not the way."

"I understand. But you know that I told you"—

"What? I know nothing."

"Why, did I not inform you, when I came to find you in that cursed spot, that Mamma Teresa—had changed her residence?"

"Yes, but I did not believe you really knew. And why did she leave so soon?"

"Listen, Damiano! your poor mother has suffered terribly from the injustice that has been done you. Do you think, then?"—

"What can I think? I must see her, Rocco! You know where she is. Let us go together."

As he said this, his voice trembled and he gazed at Rocco with wild eyes. But Rocco knew not how to lie to those he loved.

"You are not well at present, Damiano. Come with me . . . Let us go first"—

"No, no, no! You are not telling the truth, you wish me to believe what is not a fact. Rocco! tell me, tell me, where is my mother, my dear mother? Blessed God!"

Seeing in Damiano's face the terrible dread that made his head reel, and which he had not had the heart to express, Rocco understood that it was best not to make any mystery of the truth. But he lacked the heart to speak.

"I know," resumed Damiano, not without trembling, "my mother is ill."

"Yes, a little, but"—

"Ill? She is ill? That is true, then? You must tell me."

"Yes, she is ill."

"If that is so, let us go to her."

"But—perhaps she has not yet been informed that you are at liberty—and seeing you suddenly"—

"Never mind! Let us go, I say."

"But I—see—in all conscience, I cannot."

"How, you cannot? In the name of God, where is my mother?"

"Poor Damiano! While you were there within those four walls, they succeeded in taking Stella away. They tell me she has gone where she is well off, that she lacks nothing; I sought the place, but I have not been able

to find out anything. Mamma Teresa, when she was left alone, without you, without Stella, began to go down, to feel ill; and one day, being no longer able to stand on her feet, not having a mind that was capable of thinking for herself, she gave in and allowed herself to be taken to the hospital."

"To the hospital!"

At that grief-stricken cry, Rocco had just time to catch Damiano in his arms, for the poor youth had not strength enough to stand the blow; he had swooned in the street.

Rocco dragged him into a neighboring carpenter-shop. Assisted by the carpenter, he laid him upon a bench, and between them, bathing his head in cold water, they succeeded in restoring him to his senses. Once on his feet again, Damiano recovered his courage. He thanked the carpenter for his charity, and went out with Rocco, begging the latter to accompany him as far as the Hospital. They went thither together. But as it was near evening, they found the gates closed, and, despite all their prayers, they were not allowed to enter. Rocco did not know where to take his unhappy friend for the night. Since his return he had slept upon straw in an abandoned coach-house through the owner's compassion. He was ashamed to offer to share these quarters with Damiano. He still held in reserve the sum of ten lire, the last of his money, and he decided that the time for using them had arrived. With his friend he entered a humble inn and made him eat a mouthful; then, seeing him so oppressed and exhausted, he persuaded him to go to bed. Damiano obeyed; Rocco sat down beside him and they spent nearly all night in exchanging confidences and words of comfort.

It was then that Rocco related how he learned what had happened to Teresa, a story which he had not had the courage to tell his friend when they had met in the prison. When he had arrived in Milan, he was declared

an invalid and released from military service. He at once ran to the Piazza Fontana, to that house, to that fourth story, of which he had ever thought in the time when he was far away from the dear mountains of our country. Arriving with a beating heart at the door, he had found himself in familiar conversation with the old huckster, whose name he could not remember. The latter, however, no sooner heard him make mention of Mamma Teresa, than she slammed the door in his face, saying only:

"This is my house. Here you will find neither mamma nor Teresa; go to the Hospital—if she is still there you will find her."

Damiano, mute and motionless, sustained this trial, the most difficult heaven had ever sent him. He did not curse, he did not weep, he concentrated all his grief into a single thought, the determination to see his mother, and to kneel at the foot of that lonely bed. Only one lament escaped him all through the night. This was when he said to his friend:

"Oh, Rocco, you would have done better to let me go as a soldier. Perhaps I might not then, as now, have sent my mother to die in a hospital."

When morning came, having embraced each other, they walked without a word toward the Hospital Maggiore.

There at first they could find no one who could tell them where poor Teresa had been taken. On the stairs, however, they met by chance the attendant Ghezzi. They accosted him. His heart was mildly moved at sight of the disheveled youth and his soldier friend, who questioned him with tears in their eyes; and he led them to the bed where the unhappy object of their search had been lying for two months. Ghezzi had taken upon himself the responsibility for breaking the rules, and he consented that they should remain there long after the usual hour when visits to the patients are permitted.

That poor sick woman was perhaps the only one in the whole ward who for weeks had lain in bed without seeing anyone belonging to her. Perceiving that she was near her end, Ghezze thought she might perhaps bless even him.

The invalid had raised herself on the bed. With closed eyes she was praying, resigning herself to whatever the Lord had decreed, even to being deprived of the sight of her children. She thought that doubtless Stella and Celso had found refuge in some safe place, and she offered up to heaven the agony she had experienced for Damiano, whose imprisonment had probably been a mortal blow to him.

When, opening her eyes, she saw that youth beside her bed, gazing at her with pious love, not daring to utter his name, she smiled a little and shook her head, thinking it was all a dream, and resumed her prayers. But the voice of Ghezze made itself heard: "Eh! don't you know your son any longer?"

"Oh, saints in Paradise! Is it you, Damiano?"

"Yes, mamma."

"So the Lord has not wished to deny me this consolation?"

"It was not I, you see, but those who wished to do you good in their own way who were the cause of all. At last I have been declared innocent, and I am here, I am with you, mamma! Oh, pardon your child!"

Bending over the bed he pressed lovingly the emaciated hands of his mother.

"And I also thank heaven, Mamma Teresa," Rocco gathered courage to say. He had come forward on the tips of his toes, and now stood behind his friend. "I thank heaven that I have been able to return to see you! This arm of mine is only a stump, but I would give the other if I could see you out of bed."

"And Stella—tell me where she is, mamma. Why do I not find her at least beside this bed?"

"Oh! she is in a better place," answered the sick woman resignedly. "She is in a house of the Lord."

"What, has she abandoned you thus, at this time?"

"I willed it myself, Damiano! If I never see her again, it will be another sacrifice offered to God."

"No, mamma, do not say so: Stella shall not be torn away from us by those people who have already done us too much harm. But the time will come! We will see to it that a little justice is done on our side. Yes, those who have stretched you on this bed will have to pay for it."

But Damiano perceived that the unfortunate woman, terrified by his violent words, turned away her head, and, oppressed by emotion, avoided his gaze. Then he bowed in supplication before her, and with the tenderest and most loving words that he could find he sought to assuage the pain he had involuntarily given. The clouds soon disappeared from that aged and venerated brow. The two youths sat beside her, and when the hour came that they must leave, they made Ghezso promise that he would let them return in the evening. When they returned, Ghezso had so far softened that he allowed them both to remain long into the night, conversing with the sick woman about many things they had at heart. Then Damiano learned how and when Stella had been placed in the Retreat; and hearing further that Celso, some weeks before, had gone on a journey with his superior, without having been notified of his mother's sickness, he began to understand all that network of unhappy circumstances in which his family had been involved. Then Rocco, to cheer Teresa, began on his story of those two years, and Damiano fell into profound thought.

But the happiness of seeing her son again, and the rush of so many emotions had entirely prostrated the poor sufferer. At one o'clock that night, Ghezso, returning to dismiss the visitors, found the patient in a swoon, bathed in cold perspiration, and the two young

men vainly endeavoring to recall her to life. The swoon lasted half an hour; and the attendant, knowing that the woman was in bad case, deemed it well to inform both the physician and the priest.

When Don Theodore arrived at Teresa's bed and saw the two young men, he guessed at once that they could be none other than the children of the patient. He leaned over her, felt her pulse, and found that her life current was flowing very slowly, and that the syncope must have resulted from a strong and sudden emotion. He reassured the boys, and instructed the attendant what he should do to revive the patient. When she began to show signs of returning life, he insisted they should leave her alone, declaring that it was dangerous to talk with her any longer. But he comforted them, when he saw them leaving, almost insane with grief, saying that she was in no immediate danger, and that when they returned next morning at the permitted hour, they would have reason to thank the Lord.

The grave and pious words of the priest touched Damiano's heart. He took his mother's hand in his, kissed it without her being conscious of the act; and the two friends, silently walking across the ward, left the Hospital.

CHAPTER XXXIX

A NEW CONSPIRACY

THE next morning, when Damiano and Rocco arrived at the door of the Annunciation ward, awaiting the hour of opening, Ghezze, who had seen them coming up the stairs, pretended not to notice them and drew to one side. As it happened, he had just been seriously reprimanded by one of the medical inspectors for the liberty he had taken on the previous night; and when Damiano ran to meet him

there was no recognition in his eye. But, seeing that the lad had been weeping, he could not keep up this attitude, and, forestalling his question: "Be of good cheer," he said, "your mother will get well; the sight of you was a medicine that did her a great deal of good." But nothing could move him to open the door before the appointed hour.

The two youths, finding him adamant, asked to be allowed to visit the good priest whom they had already met, and the attendant showed them the way up the steps to his room.

They entered timidly. Don Theodore recognized them immediately, and asked them to sit down. His reassuring news concerning the invalid, whom he had been to see again that morning, emboldened them to acquaint him with what little they thought themselves at liberty to tell him about their misfortunes.

"The family of the poor is my family," he said, "open your hearts to me, and if I am unable to assist you, at least I may be able to give you some words of counsel in the name of Him who mitigates all sorrows."

Damiano could hardly believe it true that he had found a man who would talk to them as to his brothers. He was captivated by the mingling of seriousness and affection which tempered every accent of the priest. He told him as well as he could the brief story of his life, and of the misfortunes that had plunged his family into such extremities.

When Don Theodore understood that the other lad, who was still dressed in his soldier's cloak, was not the brother of Damiano, but his only friend; when he heard of the generous sacrifice the good fellow had made of his own liberty so that a family not his own might not lose their only support, he was amazed and moved, and was consoled to find a soul so rare and honest under that rough shell. He sought to know more about them—how they had come to know each other, and where

and when; and Rocco, who in all his life had met no one save Damiano who would listen to him or to his thoughts, began to talk as his heart dictated, of his early years, whereof he remembered little, that time having been to him like a dream to which he never had found a clue. But he also remembered that as a child, when he heard other children asking for their mothers, he would burst out weeping, and flee far away into the country, never stopping save to look up at the infinite sky, in the hope that a voice might call to him also in the manner in which the children of others were called by name.

This strange revelation struck Don Theodore forcibly. The certainty that this lad belonged to that large family of poor little ones who bear the burden of misfortune, or of a sin not by them committed; the correspondence of age and of time, and finally the circumstance that he had almost entirely lost the memory of his childhood—everything, in short, served to give form to a vague presentiment of the priest that this young man might be the child for whom he had sought so long and so vainly. He questioned him more minutely, noting in his responses the slightest thing that might give him some clue to the truth. But he gave no external evidence of the preoccupation of his thoughts, not wishing to disturb the serene and simple soul of the poor soldier.

Therefore, as soon as he saw that his interrogatories seemed to rouse a vague trouble in the boy's mind, and raised some shadow of suspicion in Damiano, he desisted, and bade farewell to both after making them promise to return on the morrow. Damiano passed all that day by his mother's bed. Teresa had begun to hope again, and never ceased thanking God, who had restored her child to her.

Damiano did not wish to let her know the thoughts which in the meanwhile had been reawakening in him. He felt himself to be, as ever, honest and intelligent;

his courage and his honor were unimpaired, and two months of unjust imprisonment should not have changed him in the sight of those who had wished him well in the past. So he placed all his hopes in Signor Natale, his former employer, whom he esteemed as a king among men. He was persuaded that Natale would not do him the wrong of dismissing him. He intended to present himself before him the next day, in all frankness and sincerity, and once he had reëntered his shop, he hoped to be able again to secure himself a home and move his mother thither as soon as he could. He was certain that Stella would return to them. The means he would decide upon later.

As Damiano and Rocco emerged from the great door of the Hospital, they saw at a little distance three persons meeting in the street, who seemed to be a little astonished to find themselves together. They entered the old inn of the Bison. Two of them appeared to be in perfect harmony with each other, but the third hung back, with a show of fear and hesitation, as if he thought and wished it to be understood that this was no place for him. But the others had him between them, and by means of compliments and courtesies were urging him on. They ordered a little room on the ground floor to be opened to them, and placed themselves at a table, forcing their unwilling guest to sit down with them. Then the one who seemed to be in authority ordered a capon with truffles, and a bottle of Barbéra.

Presently the third man seemed to pick up courage, but he still glanced askance at his comrades and then at the door, as if he did not yet feel himself entirely safe.

"It is my treat to-day!" exclaimed the first, and by his air and his bearing he showed that he belonged to the privileged class, even without the fine diamond that glistered on the bosom of his shirt. He made every effort

to keep up good humor with courtesies and jests, and with the care he took that the glasses of his guests should not remain empty. One of them, a common-looking man, although arrayed in new clothes which made some show of gentility, was entirely at his ease. The other, on the contrary, moved his shoulders uneasily, and tried to shrink within his old cloak, and while he took up his glass with one hand, with the other he hid his triangular hat under the table.

"I am indeed obliged to you," began he who had ordered the supper, "for your condescension, Don Aquilino."

"Oh, don't mention it, my dear sir."

The priest who, influenced partly by fear and partly by gluttony, had not known how to resist the invitation of Signor Omobono and Rosso, the *Illustrissimo's* valet, was in fact the unfortunate Don Aquilino.

"But tell me," resumed Signor Omobono, "tell me, you who enjoy the favor of so many who may know—It is said that some time ago, under the guise of a benefactor, a certain person whom I do not wish to name introduced himself into a certain family to aid in a certain intrigue. I don't know whether I make myself clear. It appears that the affair was nothing less than an attempt to put a girl forcibly into a convent."

"Ah, indeed!" interrupted the priest, shaking his head, while to himself he said: "Eh! into what sort of snare have I fallen?"

"You are surprised. But if I were to tell you that there is someone who is examining into this story, and that he may be able to find—I assure you of this—sufficient material to start a lawsuit?"

"Good heavens!" returned the chaplain, "but I'll lay a wager that you are misinformed; indeed, I am certain that you are wrong."

"And if I should tell you the name of that person?"

"The name? I know nothing about it."

"Oh, come now! It is said that you must know something about it."

"I am not in the case, I tell you."

The poor chaplain had fallen into the trap through very fear. The other, with a little malicious smile on his lips, glanced sidewise at his companion, who seemed to be giving his mind more to the bottle than to anything else, though he had not lost a word or a gesture of his two neighbors.

"Indeed, had I not had the good fortune of knowing you for a long time, Don Aquilino, I might certainly suspect evil"—

"What do you mean, Signor?"

"You excuse yourself with such careful anticipation, that one would say"—

"What? what?"

"That you are too anxious to conceal the part you may have taken in this affair—not altogether charitable"—

"I am not in the case, I repeat, and if anybody has told you"—

"I am not blaming anyone. On the contrary, I am more than persuaded that if you could have had your wish, the thing would not have happened."

"Are you jesting or are you speaking sincerely, Signor?" Poor Don Aquilino's hand shook so that he could not fix his fork in the mouthful smoking on his plate.

"It seems to me," continued the other, "that these are not matters for laughter. I have much respect for you, and I am speaking to you with my heart in my hand, as to a friend. There is a person—I do not wish to name him—who does not look favorably upon that conventicle in the sacristy, deeming it, indeed, an offense expressly intended for himself. It is not right. I will tell you that it has been told to this person—you understand me perfectly—that the plot was prepared some time ago; that certain lies, certain malign inventions, have been disseminated, and that, in a word, you yourself, Don

Aquilino, have extended a helping hand to those who have made it a point to interfere with the nobleman who shall be nameless."

"But, Signor Omobono, you confuse my head. I don't know what you mean by all these suppositions. I never have done harm to any one in this world; I did what I was ordered for a good purpose, and if I failed it was not my fault."

"But you will not understand," insisted the other; "I am not talking about you now; we only wish to know whether the young girl really took that step of her own free will or whether she was forced to it."

"That may be," said the chaplain, looking at the other with suspicion, and almost exhausted by the painful interrogatory.

"Nobody wishes to trap you, dear Don Aquilino; you yourself have said that you failed. It is a question therefore of remedying matters, and you might"—

"What can I do? For pity's sake, don't drag me by the feet. And if there be anyone who has his own ends in view"—

"Oh, yes, that's understood! The usual subterfuge of a fellow conspirator! But we shall see."

It was Rosso who put in the last remark, with the wink of one who makes a jest of everything. He said nothing more, but reaching for the third bottle, took out the cork with the blade of his knife, and poured the contents into the priest's glass and his own. Then he cried: "Hurrah for the syrup of the canteen, which kisses and bites! Let us be merry! Dismiss your scruples, Don Aquilino!"

"Hush! for pity's sake!" retorted the chaplain in a low, angry tone, for the little he had drunk had not sufficed to drive away his fears; "you are trying to play an ugly trick upon me."

"Oh, you can be easy in your mind," replied Signor Omobono. "The monsignori of the Curia, though they

are only two steps from here, cannot hear you. But what harm are you doing? You are enjoying a little of the grace of God, in company with two good Christians, and emptying a glass of wine to your neighbor. What is there to criticise in this?"

"It is true that I—but"—

"But—but—you know what the monks used to say; if I remember aright, it was *Manducate quæ apponuntur vobis*, and they wrote it in bold letters on the entrance to the refectory! I too can do things according to rule. But do not let us lose time. You could then, if necessary, testify that the young woman of whom we spoke did not enter the Retreat through an absolute and acknowledged vocation?"

"If I must say what seems to me"—

"But you have already said it. Do not change the cards in your pack."

"I confess it. I had a little compassion for her."

"My good chaplain, let us understand each other," interrupted Rosso brusquely.

"Ah! she excited your compassion," said Signor Omo-bono ironically.

"Oh, let us finish this business!" broke in Rosso, again. "Here, in two words, is what I have to say: whatever you may happen to hear said concerning that girl in the Retreat, take good care not to mix yourself up in the matter. Open your mouth to no one, whatever occurs. And if ever you are called upon by the authorities, you will do well to declare that the young woman was taken by force to that house."

"But this"—

"This is what I counsel you to say, for your own good, for your own peace of mind."

"What! There is something in the air then?"

"Yes, by heavens! Every day something happens."

A noise arose in the next room, as of a chair thrown upon the stone floor, and of approaching steps.

Signor Omobono leaped at once to his feet, speech died on Rosso's lips, and both turned their faces to the side whence the noises proceeded. Don Aquilino, who had heard nothing, but had seen the sudden dismay of his companions, knew not what to think of this very strange behavior.

"What was that noise?" said Omobono, lifting his shoulders, but with altered mien. He also could not remain quiet in his chair, and he kept his eyes nailed to the door. "That rascally landlord," he continued in lower tones, "promised to leave us in undisturbed freedom. Go and see, Rosso, very quietly, whether anyone is over there."

"What does it matter?"

"Oh, go and see—do me that favor. I know what I am saying."

"Yes, yes, for the love of heaven. So that no one may find me here!" stammered Don Aquilino.

Rosso went to the door, peered into the next room, turned back immediately, sat down again, and began to laugh uneasily; then wetting his throat with another draught, he turned to Signor Omobono.

"There is nobody, I tell you. Go and see for yourself, in case it ever comes into your head to talk about our affairs."

"But I heard a footstep a moment ago, and I could swear that somebody touched the door."

"You are dreaming," returned Rosso; "and besides, what of it?"

"But if ever"—suggested the chaplain, who had a grasshopper's heart.

"It must have been a cat jumping down from a table, or perhaps one of the waiters, who in passing knocked against a chair," Signor Omobono resumed, as if to reassure himself and his companion. "Besides, if it were anybody, we are not engaging in conspiracy, we have said no evil of anyone."

"Yes, but a man like myself, who never is seen in an inn"—bleated the chaplain.

"Eh! body of the devil! You are crazy with fear, dear Signor Chaplain? What are we? we are honest men, much better than you, and much less hypocritical," cried Rosso, angrily.

"You are a lunatic," returned the priest, eager for the moment when he might quit the place.

They rose from the table. Don Aquilino heaved a sigh, thinking that this supper had certainly done him very little good. The other two exchanged a significant glance, and walked out. The priest followed.

Passing through the room in which they had fancied they heard something, they took notice of a chair reversed behind the table, and on the table were two glasses, the remains of a loaf, and an earthenware pitcher. This confirmed the fear that someone had been drinking in that room, and might even have overheard their conversation. But at least two of them reassured themselves with the thought that even if anyone had undertaken to play the spy upon them, he would have been unable to extract any meaning from what had been said. So, after Signor Omobono had paid the score, they passed tranquilly into the street.

Don Aquilino, not wishing to be seen in their company, took off his hat, stammered out a courteous excuse, and hastened away along the wall of the Piazza Fontana, thanking Heaven that at last he could breathe more freely.

Signor Omobono and Rosso, having crossed the piazza, turned to the opposite side, and continued their conversation with greater frankness.

CHAPTER XL

DON AQUILINO'S INQUISITORS

THE unlucky chaplain had just turned the corner of the Via della Tanaglie, when he suddenly felt a hand laid upon his shoulder, and that light touch sufficed to congeal his blood. He stopped and looked around. But he could not recognize the person facing him. It was a young man of plebeian aspect, with a gray cloak, and a cap of white linen adorned with red, similar to those that soldiers wear.

"I knew," was his wrathful thought, "that those two scoundrels had drawn me into a trap, and they are now plotting new mischief. Perhaps the authorities are already on their track. Let us see what will happen to me, who know nothing."

Making a heroic effort to speak, he succeeded at last in ejaculating hoarsely: "What do you want with me, Signor Soldier?"

"Nothing, Signor Canon, or whatever you are. Or, I should say a matter of no great moment. Be kind enough to tell me whether you were at the Bison a few moments ago in company with those two men you see over there—the men now turning the corner of the Arcivescovado."

"I—I—see no one. I don't know of whom you are talking," answered the priest in a pathetic tone.

"Come, now, that will not do; I saw you there myself; I must, therefore, ask you to have the goodness to come with me."

"But—but—where?"

"Oh, there's nothing to fear; I am not a policeman, only a good fellow who wishes to oblige a friend. And that friend, who wishes to speak two words with you,

is only a few yards away—in that little café over yonder.”

“I do not know either you or your friend,” answered Don Aquilino, recovering his breath a little, and hoping to escape by adopting a serious tone.

“No harm is meant. Come with me; don’t refuse, and then I shall be satisfied.”

“But if I cannot—if I have not time? I have other things on my hands. And I am not one of those priests who allow themselves to be seen in public cafés.”

“What? Have you not just come out of an inn?”

“How do you know that? And then, besides, to go into one with a soldier—that is different.”

“With an honest man, say rather, when only a few moments ago you were sitting at table with two damnable scoundrels.”

“Oho! Is that the way you talk?”

“In short, will you come or not? If you will give a decent man a chance to talk with you, it will be all the better for you; if not, I shall find somebody close at hand who will make you talk.”

“What? what? Is that a threat?”

“Only a bit of advice, Signor Canon. Come with me, I tell you, for a few minutes, and I give you my word no one will do you any harm; on the contrary, you will have an opportunity to repair a great wrong.”

“I do not understand. Oh, poor me! in what sort of business am I entangled? And if I say I understand nothing”—

“You understand everything, and you will come with me.” So saying, he seized Don Aquilino by the arm and dragged him along.

It was already night, so that few passers-by were aware of this rapid colloquy. Indeed if anybody had noticed it, he would have been speedily reassured by seeing them go off arm-in-arm like two old acquaintances. The priest cursed in his heart the hour he had met Sig-

nor Omobono with his companion, and the bait of a dinner and a bottle which had drawn him to that quarter.

They entered the café that the soldier had pointed out. It was deserted, but immediately a young man rushed furiously from an adjoining room. As soon as he saw the pair, he transfixed the dismayed chaplain with an angry glare. With a threatening gesture, he was for explaining himself at once, but the other youth took the words out of his mouth, and for the moment turned the storm away from the cowering priest.

"Here is our friend the canon," said the soldier Rocco; "he has come here with the utmost willingness, ready to inform us of everything that it is necessary for us to know. Sit down, Signor. Will you order anything—rosolio, coffee, anything at all? We are making good cheer, as you see. Sit down, take breath for a moment, and we shall understand each other in two words."

Damiano, who had expected the chaplain here, seemed to be overcome by mental anguish. With his sad and uncertain look, his pale cheeks, hollowed by long suffering, and by his new sorrow, he resembled little the frank and ardent youth of three months before, who had made himself the master and the friend of a band of honest artisans, who had begun to confide in himself and in the future, aspiring with them and preparing himself for higher things when the time came.

To learn how the first rejoicing he had felt in seeing his mother again had been so suddenly poisoned, we must go back to the time when Damiano and Rocco had departed from the hospital.

When, with a comforted heart, he had left his mother's bed—for after the crisis of the previous night she had rallied in an almost miraculous manner—he thought first of all of going to seek news of Signor Lorenzo. He had many things to tell him, and hoped to obtain from him, if not assistance, at least some sincere and helpful

advice. Reaching the distant quarter of the town where the veteran lived, he entered an old house, inhabited solely by poor families. He ascended the stairs so well known to him, pulled the string outside the door, and waited. No one came to open to him. He rang a second time. The door of a neighboring apartment opened, and an old shoemaker with three small boys holding to his trousers, put forth his head.

"Young man," he said, "have you come in search of the cavaliere? You might ring until the day of judgment; a week ago he was borne to his last home in the Gentilino cemetery."

Damiano stared at the shoemaker. He looked as if he had been deprived of his senses. He asked nothing further, but bowing his head stood motionless.

"He is there with my father!" he murmured at last. "What shall I do without him? He at least has ceased to wear his chains."

The shoemaker did not understand. He was engaged in trying to pacify his children, who were crying in chorus. Damiano, weighed down with grief, but without being able to speak, went down the stairs. A little old woman who was coming up, in passing, cast a look upon him as if she thought she knew him. Before she had reached the next flight, she turned round as if persuaded that he was indeed the person she had taken him for; and running down again, she caught him just as he had reached the street.

Without ceremony, she seized him by the arm and began to tell him that she was Caterina the washerwoman, that for seven years she had lived next door to the man he had come to see, that she knew who he was, and had seen him many times in company with the poor Signor Cavaliere, and "You are young," she continued, with all a gossip's eagerness, "and you needn't mind me, who am old; but what have you learned of the sad story? In less than eight days he was gone. But I guessed it

from the first, the moment I knew that he had taken to his bed. There was no one but me, you see, to do the little that could be done for him. I was there every moment to see if he needed anything. But that blessed man never said a word—imagine! he never even thanked me! And then he was so hard and obstinate, he would not hear of a doctor or a priest. But one morning a good priest arrived, one of the coadjutors in San Lorenzo. He is like a saint, but the old man wouldn't have anything to do with him either. But the priest was obstinate too, and I am sure that, at the end, he had the grace to recite an act of contrition for him. But all this is not what I wanted to tell you. Here it is: in the last three days he often repeated the name of Damiano—that is your name, isn't it? I could see that the poor man was thinking of something that he couldn't or wouldn't talk of. The last night, just before going off in an agony, he made me come close to him and showed me a little bag of leather he bore around his neck, begging me in charity, when the men came to bear him away, to see that they did not put their claws upon this bag. When he was dead, I couldn't rest without finding out what was in that bag. Think of it! instead of a handful of coppers, as I expected, I found only some ashes! Who knows what deviltry it was? To do the right thing, I took it to the priest."

At this Damiano remembered the last night of his poor father.

Returning at dusk to the place where Rocco expected him, he told him of this new blow and owned that he knew not what to do. He felt comfortless, abased, lost. But Rocco, with the kindness of a heart which misfortune only makes more constant, reminded him of his mother and his sister, of all that he ought to do, of all that he had promised. He repeated that he would share with him his last crust, the bread which, even with his crippled arm, he would be able to earn for himself. He told

him that it was necessary and even just to have a talk with the priest that had seen poor Signor Lorenzo in his last moments, and Damiano promised to do so.

Thence they had walked to the Piazza Fontana, and Rocco, seeing his friend so exhausted and melancholy, had with difficulty conducted him to the hostelry of the Bison, to offer him a mouthful of bread, a bowl of soup, and a glass of wine. There fate willed it, that, in the room where they sat, the two youths should overhear a confused something of the conversation narrated above. And that is the reason why Rocco, who was not without a grain of malice, had had recourse to the expedient of submitting the wretched Don Aquilino to an interrogation in due form.

"Excuse us," began Damiano, seriously, "for the possibly inconvenient manner in which we"—

"If I am not mistaken," thought Don Aquilino, "this one seems a little more humane than his comrade," and he answered with more confidence: "Truly your manner of approaching me is at least strange, and really I do not know how"—

"Come, now, none of that," Rocco broke in; "you, Signor Canon, dined merrily a little while ago at the inn, in company with two rascally impostors, who endeavored"—

"Oh, my dear sirs, I wonder at you! You have taken me by surprise. I have nothing to say. Let me go; it will be well both for you and for me." He rose to seek the door.

"Stop!" said Damiano.

"Stop!" echoed Rocco, with a hard and menacing voice. "Stop, and sit down there."

The priest grew embarrassed again, but he obeyed. With a docile aspect, he sat down on the edge of the bench. A waiter brought in the rosolio which they had ordered, and Rocco, with a complimentary flourish, presented a glass to the priest. The man did not know how

to refuse, and he drank it, although it seemed like poison to him.

"Really, Canon, as I have already said, we wish you well, and would like to leave you as a friend."

"But do not let us lose ourselves in useless talk," said Damiano, knitting his brows. "Look me well in the face. You don't recognize me, I know, but I remember you—I who have had my experiences in this world—and I have learned to read the hearts of men on their faces. Oh, if that be true which I fear! On account of my fears, I have determined to accost you, and to learn the truth. Those two men who were with you—one of whom I know only too well—talked like ribald rascals, as they are; they talked of a young girl kept by force in a Retreat, of false testimony that they need. Now tell me the meaning of this."

Don Aquilino felt as if he were sitting upon burning coals; he balanced himself upon the bench, he wished and he did not wish to confess, to tell the truth; perhaps he did not fully understand what those two scoundrels had had in their mind, as Damiano understood it. He began to wink, and also to contort his mouth with a strange whistling sound, so that Damiano lost the little patience he had painfully preserved.

"Speak, I repeat, or I— Tell me, who was the girl of whom they spoke?"

"But if I know nothing—but if, on the contrary, they are doing their best to ruin me," returned the priest, dragging out his words.

"Oh, I see!" said Damiano, with a bitter smile of disdain. "I thought you were only a catspaw, a simpleton tricked by men worse than himself; I thought one word of agony, one true sentiment might touch your heart, and that you would not consent to lend your hand to a crime. But no! You are perfectly aware of the infamy that is being attempted; perhaps with a word you might put a stop to it, and that word you have not the heart

to pronounce! You don't know anything about the matter, you say. Do you know who it is that is speaking to you?"

Damiano trembled, as he spoke thus. The priest stared at him, but he could not imagine who this lad might be.

"Well, if you really do not know what those men are plotting, I will tell you! One of those gentlemen, who has a high opinion of himself because he has around him a crowd of toad-eaters and parasites, one of those who pays for the evil he wishes to be done, and with the parchments of his ancestors saves himself from the hands of justice in this world, has determined, at all costs, to ruin a poor young girl. There are so many who, without seeking elsewhere, are willing to sell themselves for a little gold, so many who perchance would envy a lot of that sort! Well, this gentleman—I know him!—has not forgotten what, among themselves, these people are wont to call a 'fancy'! While the brother of that poor girl was languishing in prison—he, also, innocent!—and while the mother was dying in a hospital, he said to himself, 'The moment is opportune!' That is their custom, what they want, they want, and then everything can be smoothed over with a thousand, or two thousand lire. It's a good dowry; enough, perhaps, to find somebody who will give her a name, the name of an honest man, and not bother himself about the past! Is that not so? And you, dressed as you are in that habit, have you no scruples, would you be capable of lending a hand to an affair of this sort?"

"Oh, Signor, what do I hear?" murmured Don Aquilino, clasping his hands, and perturbed at heart, a little because of the sincere pity which he began to feel, a little by some compunction of conscience.

"Do you recognize me now? Do you know who I am? I am the brother of that young girl, and I know what is being plotted against my sister. At this mo-

ment she is in the Retreat, and someone has dragged her there by force, at the hour when she ought to be at her mother's bedside. This also I know! Do you tell me it is not true?"

Don Aquilino did not tremble any more. In his wretched heart, he was already won.

"But the walls of that house," added Damiano, "are not what will save her. I know that also. Very well! I am here, and I will act in the matter."

"And you, sir," added Rocco, "you must do exactly the contrary of what you have been told to do, and help us to fight these two procurers, who are hand and glove together."

"Goodness of heaven, now I understand!" said Don Aquilino at last, who as usual surrendered himself to the last speaker. "Do not believe that I should ever have been willing to know anything about an iniquity of this sort, if it were a hundred miles away! Often have I said, *Anima ejus in bonis demorabitur*, as it is in the breviary. You, perhaps, do not know Latin, but it means that I need to be always with good people, like you, for example."

Having quickly made up his mind, the chaplain decided, first of all, to save himself, and then to do a service also to the two youths, telling them, indeed, not all that they wanted to know, but what little he did know or could guess. Damiano and Rocco, at his request, promised to keep it all a secret, so that whatever might happen he would risk nothing in character or comfort. Thus, although his heart was burdened with that great weight, Don Aquilino felt as if he were restored to life, and in secret he vowed never again to allow himself to be dragged into any intrigue, not even with the holiest intentions.

Damiano did not let him go without prescribing to him all that he was to do next day; and Rocco, at the moment of separating from Don Aquilino, crushed the

old man's fingers in his hand and said: "Did I not say that we should not separate until we were good friends?"

The chaplain smiled as best he could. But the moment he left the shop, and saw the young men turning to the right, he quickly took the street to the left, and had soon reached his home, while Damiano and Rocco returned to the miserable little inn in which they had slept the previous night.

CHAPTER XLI

PURRS AND SCRATCHES

ANOTHER day had passed. In a cozy room, carpeted by a fine bit of tapestry and decorated with rich foreign furniture, an old servant in livery was trying to revive the fire on the hearth, although it was not yet the end of autumn. The fire had hardly begun to burn again when the Countess Cunegonda entered by the door opposite that through which the domestic had disappeared.

She sat down in front of a table of black wood, delicately inlaid with ivory, where she was accustomed to occupy herself with her correspondence. On the table lay portfolios of black morocco, several letters tied in a bundle, and several little books of devotion which she liked to have at hand, as small gifts to pious persons who came to recommend themselves to her.

The Countess wrote three letters without a pause. When these letters were finished, she drew forth from its envelope a larger epistle, got up in diplomatic form, and reread it with joyful eyes and the proud smile of a general who sees victory in sight.

This emotion seemed to rejuvenate the haughty lady by at least ten years. A slight flush had risen to her

wrinkled cheeks; she held herself high and erect, and, with her finger pointing to the paper, she followed, word by word, all that was written thereupon.

"Yes, there is no doubt," she then said, "we have won this time too! We may say that matters are progressing well. So let us despatch my letters." She touched a bell on the table. Then, without turning round: "Are you Venanzio?" she asked of the servant that entered.

"Excellency, yes."

"Take these letters at once to the persons to whom they are directed. But take care not to exchange one with the other. Go yourself; don't do as you did before, when, to save yourself trouble, you sent another servant on this errand."

"Never fear, Excellency, I shall do my duty."

"And wait for the answers, if there are any. Be quick about it, and, above all, don't gossip, as I know you like to do, and don't stop on the way at—you know where I mean."

The lackey placed a hand on his breast, and with a profound reverence backed to the door of the room, and hastened to do the errand of his mistress.

The lady inclined her head in thought, and on her brow a pathetic seriousness took the place of that flash of joy which a moment earlier had driven every cloud from her face. She could no longer sit still. Rising from the desk, she began to walk up and down the room with a queenly bearing; then, approaching one of the balconies, she threw a distracted glance into the street upon the people who passed, and, stopping to look at a picture which in its rich golden frame surmounted the mirror, she crossed her arms and said, "I have reigned, and I still reign!"

That picture represented a beautiful young woman with a high forehead, black eyebrows, and eyes of fire, dressed in an airy robe of blue satin, open far enough to reveal the fine turn of the neck and the sculpturesque

bosom. On the blond wig, constructed with multiple curls, was cocked a saucy hat of black velvet, adorned with a garland of roses and a mass of flowing ribbons of every color. The arms, bare up to the shoulder, emerged from billows of lace; one hand rested gracefully upon her hip, while the other, hovering over the bosom, wielded a precious fan in a little hand.

This was the portrait of the Countess Cunegonda when she was only twenty-one years old. Fixing her eyes on it that morning, she for a moment forgot full fifty years. And she looked back upon the glories of the past to the flames she had once lighted, to the homage of the nobility of the court, to the famous duel to which she had given rise, to those splendid *cavalieri serventi* who formed her train, who waited sometimes for months for the privilege of kissing her hand, for a salute from her fan, for a glance, or a smile.

But these memories fled, and lowering her eyes from the picture she threw a rapid glance into the mirror. "It is no longer that time," she said, "but still I am the same that I was; love is the dream of spring, but opinion governs the world."

The noise of a carriage was heard in the courtyard. A moment later the doors of the apartment were thrown open and a servant announced in a loud voice. "The Signora Contessa Cleofe." The old Countess came three steps forward to greet her friend, who understood at once from this unusual demonstration of favor that something new and important was in the air. They kissed each other on the cheeks, with that problematic tenderness which women are wont to show one another. As soon as they were seated, Countess Cleofe began:

"My dear friend, do you know anything about the grand affair which has been held in suspense for so long a time?"

"I have guessed it, dear Countess; the thing is finally decided," and in saying this she became radiant.

"Is it really true? Then"—

"The victory is ours! This morning I received the final decree, which announces the full recognition so much desired by all of us. I will say more, that even the letters from Lyons, from Modena, and from Rome bring the most certain, the most consoling news; so that we may expect to see our poor efforts crowned with the best results. I have already written this morning to Councilor Alberigo, to the reverend father, and to others of our zealous supporters. As to the father, I really do not understand the reason why, in these last months, he has shown himself a little negligent—departing for the provinces without leaving any word, and throwing all these perplexities into our hands."

"In all that I can do, I offer you, good friend, my feeble assistance. Only I wish to tell you that now, more than ever, it is necessary to manage with the utmost prudence, and not to brag so loudly of the recent triumphs, because it is no little help to our cause that you should hold yourself persecuted and oppressed. Our enemies are many, and evil weeds too often suffocate the good wheat."

"Yes, Countess, you are right on one point," said the Countess Cunegonda, in a magnificent tone, "but, on the other, it is necessary to fight in the open, with visor up, as they used to say in the time of the paladins. We can make ourselves feared; and when it is a matter of our absolute, unshakable, inexpugnable principles, we must—you will allow me to continue the metaphor—throw our gauntlet to the century."

"And you think"—

"In great things, as in small, I think we never should compromise."

"But," replied the other Countess, carefully weighing her words, "if afterward there should accrue some injury to the credit or to the good name of anyone—if any scandalous publicity should follow"—

"Why do you express these unpleasant doubts now? I have other thoughts in my head." She stopped to gaze steadily at her powerful ally for a moment, and added: "But, if I am not mistaken, you speak with some other motive in the background. Yes, you must know something which you think best to keep silent about." At this suspicion her face grew troubled and her brow wrinkled. "You have some news that you hold in reserve, I repeat; and, without fear of being mistaken, I tell you further that it concerns matters that would wound me; if that were not so, you would not look at me as you are now doing. We understand each other a little; if you have any friendship for me you must speak; tell the truth without reticence, without reserve."

"You ask in such a manner, Countess—Enough! I do not wish to give body to a shadow. There is a certain matter which was told me in confidence, which I do not wish to believe, which, indeed, I do not believe."

"Go on, Countess! Speak! You make me die of impatience."

"Well, in thinking of it, I perceive that it is a matter of no importance; in a day of triumph, as this one is for us, it is not worth while to disturb ourselves for such nonsense. There are much graver interests to keep us occupied."

"If I may command, in the name of friendship, I command you to speak! If you do not wish everything to be at an end between us, speak at once!"

The old woman grew pale. Every fiber of her body shook with a visible tremor.

"No, no, your friendship is too valuable to be renounced for so small a matter. Compose yourself; you alarm me. This is the matter to which I refer. Do you remember, Countess, that young girl, Stella by name, whom, about two months ago, we put into the Retreat, so that she might regain, through mortification and the practice of piety, a virtue which is truly, as our rever-

end friend expressed it in his famous panegyric on Saint Philomena, the pearl of innocence?"

"Yes, yes! You speak beautifully, but do not let us talk about panegyrics at present."

"Well, Countess, I say that you cannot have forgotten about that young woman; we have more than once made her the subject of conversation, and you must remember that the Superior of the house informed us that the girl, at first resigned and well disposed in everything, allowed herself subsequently to be conquered by certain ideas recalcitrant to goodness. She did nothing but weep, and, neglecting her work and her devotions, she began to show herself restless, stubborn, not without damage to discipline and scandal to the community."

"I know it, and it was precisely on this account that not long ago, making my regular visit to the Retreat, I said to Mother Eleutaria, that, in case of a relapse, she might use a heavy hand on the insolent rebel, so as to restore her all the sooner to the right path."

"It must be said that she only became worse; you must believe it, my dear friend, severity often does not succeed. Either because she was suffering from her punishments, which, after all, did not amount to much—one day of bread and water, some hours of silence—or perhaps, as seems more likely, influenced by evil suggestions, to which we have not yet been able to find the clue, the girl disappeared yesterday afternoon."

"What do I hear? But is it certain?"

"Think of it! I have just come from the Retreat, where the affair has produced only too unpleasant a sensation. After all, it is a scandal which, if divulged, might no little prejudice people against our not very flourishing institution. And this is not all."

"The case is grave and serious, Countess; and still you did not wish to speak!"

"I did not wish to? You do me wrong. I have the best reasons for not being precipitate. In itself the dis-

appearance of that refugee would not be a thing from which unpleasant consequences might be feared; but there are suspicions—circumstances—facts that accompany it, and these we must argue about.”

“You speak in such uncertain, almost enigmatical fashion, that I cannot enter into the circumstances you are concealing.”

“I assure you that it is difficult and painful to talk. But I must, and I will. Here, then, is what from the first investigation can be divined—suspected, I mean. There is some one in the Retreat who noticed for several days a mysterious figure that seemed to be spying around the house from the side of the garden. Yesterday morning a woman of middle age, also unknown, presented herself to speak with the girl and held a long conversation with her. When the latter returned to her companions she was seen to wipe her eyes, though nobody said a word to her. Three hours later the girl could not be found.”

“But what is to be inferred from that?”

“Pardon, good friend, my first suspicions put me readily on the trail. I have interrogated, confronted, weighed, and—must I tell you? I fear that there enters into this episode a person”—

“A person! Countess!”

“I hope that I am mistaken. But, in confidence, you know all that happened, some months ago, when it was decided to save this unfortunate victim from danger. You know that a certain person—in a word, your brother”—

At this point Countess Cleofe perceived that her noble friend, who at first had been thrown off her guard by this unexpected revelation, now had recovered her balance; she raised her head with an air of offended dignity, prepared to do battle against her suspicions. And, in fact, without letting her friend tell her what she knew, the Countess Cunegonda interrupted:

"I see, I know what envy and calumny dare to rave about, venting their spite against the great and the powerful! I know that it is only necessary to do good to meet ingratitude. What do I wish to say about this? Nothing, Countess, except that the things you assume, or report, are falsehoods—absurd inventions!"

"Things—I repeat—falsehoods! This is too much, Countess, too much!"

The two old ladies sat upright, glaring at each other. Through the wrinkles of their withered cheeks it almost seemed as if the hatred they felt for each other in secret forced itself to the surface; and for the first time in many years a subtle and corroding anger in hearts that were silent to all other emotions openly distilled itself in the venom of pride and jealousy.

"In fact," continued the Countess Cunegonda, undismayed by the dark and contemptuous glance of her rival, "for a long time I have been conscious that you have been attempting, through subterfuges, calumnies, intrigues, and other provocations, to involve me in such cabals, such difficulties as would force me to abdicate from that primacy, which, however unworthily, I still hold, in the general opinion and in fact. And now, on the day when I can say that I have victory in my hand, to-day of all days, you would snatch from me the fruits of my infinite pains! Ah, yes, it is very clear, others wish to usurp my place; and thus they create scandals and bad examples, and they cast lots for"—

"That is enough! I intended to let you talk to the utmost of your capacity, but self-respect will not allow such incredible assaults! I, suspected of lies, of intrigues? I, covetous of authority, of power? I, smirched by such black injustice, and by whom? By one who called me friend, to whom I have always yielded in everything, with the greatest condescension, if not always with real respect."

"It is a pity that I never have been aware of it!"

"But now all is finished—a word, a shadow, a nothing, can destroy the most solid, the oldest friendship."

"It is the fault of your underhand envy"—

"I say, of your despotism."

"Oh, repeat it, if you dare."

"Yes, despotism, and of the most absolute kind. Do not make me talk, do not make me recriminate; I fear that piety and gentleness do not always go hand in hand."

"This, too!"

"And perhaps they are right who say that we wish to dominate, to invade and pry into things. But whose fault is it? Who is it that puts on a show of religion for worldly ends?"

The elder of the two Countesses trembled with anger, but her keen little eyes seemed to shoot fire at her incautious rival. Still she was sufficiently mistress of herself not to bandy any more words. Rising from the armchair, with all the dignity of offended rank, she said:

"I will not answer one who comes to insult me in my own house. . . . I can support insults as a trial that comes to me from above; and though offended I can pity and forgive the offender who, in offending, thinks she is right and credits herself with victory."

So saying, she turned her back on her visitor, and withdrew slowly into the inner apartments.

"Ambitious hypocrite!" hissed the other Countess behind her back; "she pretends to love her neighbor, and she would like to see me humiliate myself before her! But I, yes, I, have made her humiliate herself! It is years and years since I have tasted a quarter of an hour like this!"

CHAPTER XLII

STARTLING NEWS

THE reader already knows the gloomy and suspicious-looking house in which the Signor Omobono lived, and, although that hiding-place was in the most deserted and melancholy part of the city, and as unknown to everyone as the cave of a wolf, we will turn thither once more to discover, if possible, the tortuous movements of that wicked man, who with covert artifices continued through sheer cruelty his vendetta against the unfortunate family of Teresa.

He had gone up to his own room one day after another meeting with his ally Rosso, with whom he had been discussing the safest plans for succeeding in his villainous scheme. Closing and bolting the door, he opened a purse of gold coins upon the table. They were the receipts from a judicial sale which he had that morning caused to be held, to recover a debt from one of his creditors. An honest father of a family, a widower, had been evicted from the last refuge of poverty, and was now wandering around begging bread for his children, but Signor Omobono had been paid, lira for lira, and penny for penny, all that was owing to him, both principal and interest.

He passed behind a screen, and having shut the money up in a safe built into the wall, he threw himself at full length upon his little sofa, and knitting his brows, he began to think.

When, in company with the Illustrissimo's valet, he had endeavored to draw out the defenseless chaplain, he did it for no other purpose than to entangle the villainy he was planning in such a snarl of complications that it would be difficult to unravel it. It was not his aim to obey blindly the caprices of the Illustrissimo. Proud

and vile at the same time, he had always wallowed in the dirt, but in his heart he despised, he abhorred those who stood above him. He had entered into the good graces of not a few gentlemen of the kind who through laziness or prodigality like to have a usurer's purse opened to them at need; and he had thus extended around himself a net-work of intrigues and quarrels. Seeing the gold heaping up in his strong-box, he looked forward longingly to the time when he in his turn might be able to despise others as he had been despised and kicked in the days of his nonentity. Thus he had accustomed himself to do evil through habit, as a worm gnaws the fibers of a tree.

From the first day when, in the huckster's house, he had run across Damiano and been rebuffed by him, Signor Omobono nursed the wrath and shame he had suffered. He could not understand how this youth could have guessed what his designs were in offering him his friendship; he did not think on the evil of those designs, but on the insult of finding himself so misprized, or possibly so fully understood. Afterward, when he had gained the confidence of the widow, when he had recognized the beauty of the innocent girl, there was a moment when he might have wished to undo the evil he had done at the mere behest of a satiated and powerful rich man. But at that time the repeated threatenings of Damiano, and the rancor that had gnawed him ever since the boy's hand had stamped shame upon his countenance, blinded him to everything; he thought only of revenge.

That revenge was to be of the most certain, of the most atrocious; he wished to see that family ruined forever. If at that time fear had not been stronger than hate, a crime would have been a trifle to him, for he hoped to see both brother and sister made infamous. It was in order to take no risk himself that he had urged Martigny to that wicked undertaking of which we have seen the failure. But though the blow had failed,

it had consumed much of the gold of its illustrious promoters, all the more that their tools had every opportunity to exaggerate the dangers they had run. Omobono had not forgotten how much it had cost him to escape from the perilous inquiries of the authorities on that day when, together with Signor Lorenzo and Damiano, he had been brought before a tribunal. The name of the *Illustrissimo*, and a cunning mass of lies, boldly sworn to by him on that embarrassing occasion, had saved him for the moment, but he had not believed himself entirely safe until the moment when Martigny, embarked on dangerous waters, heard a sentence of banishment passed upon him, because he could not even prove in what country he had been born, notwithstanding his exhibition of certificates, all as false as his own actions.

But Omobono felt neither pity nor remorse, nothing save fear. He well knew that after all these happenings the *Illustrissimo* was quite capable of forgetting the pastime he had wished to offer him to distract from the tedium of lordly etiquette. But to forward the more occult end for which he labored, Omobono, with diabolical insinuations, had been able from time to time to remind him of the girl, alluding to the insult which had been offered him by carrying her away from him under his very nose, until at last the *Illustrissimo*, in a sudden access of wrath, declared that he would willingly part with two of his finest dairies, if he could in return rid himself of every member of the confraternity who had had the presumption to dictate to him and thwart him.

It was after recognizing this disposition in the *Illustrissimo* that Omobono grew positive of being able to bring two enterprises to a successful end, that is, to attract to himself the benevolences of his noble patron, and to wreak the vengeance for which he had hitherto labored in vain; and now he decided that it was the right moment to bring together the threads already woven. From the beginning he saw it would be danger-

ous folly to kidnap the girl from the Retreat; such an expedient might have served in more ancient times, but now the criminal code speaks with too clear a voice. To cover up his own tracks, he revolved a plan which would most readily induce the girl to fly from the Retreat, and he thought he had found it.

During the hour he had thus passed alone, sitting in his cold and silent room, he had gone over all the tortuous paths he had traversed until now. He did not tremble. He had no horror at himself, only he once murmured, "If matters had not stood as they do between Damiano and me, I would not have gone to this extremity."

But if in his heart he felt no sense of guilt, the sinister expression of his face, the restlessness of certain involuntary gestures that escaped him from time to time, were signs of the impatience and the hatred that surged within him, and the curses that accompanied them.

Doubtless, he was waiting expectantly. But as nobody came, he could not keep quiet; rising in fury, he passed his hand across his forehead, as if to drive away the thoughts which crowded into his mind, and once more went out.

Damiano had spent a good part of that day in seeking traces of those who had been making attempts to reach his sister. Though he was not aware of all the wicked machinations plotted against her, he strongly suspected that the people he had seen on the previous evening were quite capable of committing a crime. He must, therefore, first find the priest, from whom he had been able to extract not a little of what he wished to know. And although Rocco (the two were now inseparable) pressed him to go straight to the Retreat and boldly demand that they should let him take away his sister, Damiano would not accept his reasoning, wishing

first to unearth the person who would, if necessary, confirm his words with his own testimony.

But Don Aquilino, overburdened with fear, had disappeared, and the two youths could not find out whither he had fled.

At nightfall, Damiano and Rocco, who hoped to arrive in time to frustrate that infamous plot, were slowly taking their way along the walls of the city, not far from the Porta Romana. Then they turned into an unfrequented path, which, between the hedges and walls of orchards and kitchen-gardens, led to the Retreat.

The Ave Maria was striking from every belfry in the city as the two walked cautiously and suspiciously, attentive to every footfall, to every sound. Damiano had determined to keep vigil all night, and at daybreak to present himself at the Retreat to demand his sister, and conduct her, at whatever cost, to his mother.

Rocco, who had been unwilling to abandon his friend in that emergency, walked by his side far more cheerfully, from a secret hope that he would soon see Stella again. Damiano's heart beat fiercely. His friend, clasping his hand, found it very cold.

"What is it, Damiano?"

"I don't know, Rocco. An evil presentiment. Oh, what can we do gainst those cursed, powerful men?"

"Is it you who speak thus, Damiano? You, strong in adversity, as a man ought to be."

"Yes, I had all along believed I could do my duty. And what followed, you saw it for yourself!"

"Hush! We are on the point of doing an act of justice ourselves. Then there is always He who said, 'Aid thyself and I will aid thee!' Was it not He who even this morning made you find in the hands of the priest the three hundred lire left you by your old comrade? In these moments, they are"—

"Oh, yes, a fortune on which we may be able to live for three months, and then"—

"And then God sees, and courage will provide."

"You are right, Rocco! You are good, and trust in Heaven and in yourself. I, on the other hand, am vile, lost—and I hardly believe in good any more."

He held his peace; then in despair he cried, "Oh, my sister, shall I ever see you again?"

"What are you thinking of now?" answered Rocco. "It is very true that it would have been better to take her at once from that evil environment. But you would not listen to me—you obstinately determined to discover that scoundrel in the act; and perhaps a love of vengeance entered into your decision. It will be all right, however, if we don't arrive too late."

"Is it you that talks to me thus? And in a moment like this?"

"Yes, you are right. Do not listen to me. You know it is a remainder from my old melancholy. All will go well and you will certainly be content in the end. Mamma will get well at last, will return to live with you two. You will be happy; and Rocco? Rocco will be, as before, all alone in the world."

"Hush!" interrupted Damiano, "doesn't it seem to you that someone is coming from that side?"

"No, it is the corner of the wall which throws a long shadow."

"Has the chaplain betrayed us?"

"That is impossible, he was dying of fear, and besides, he swore"—

"For such as he, what is an oath? And if, instead, he has emptied his sack among those who wished to make such a precious spectacle of him? If fear were stronger in him than remorse?"

"No, no! from what he experienced yesterday, I wager that he has deemed it best to try a change of air."

"And so, on his account, we have lost a day! And who knows"—

"I always said that he should be left to cook in his

own broth, and that we should first come here to seek for that poor girl."

Damiano stood plunged in thought for a moment. Then, taking his friend by the hand, he said:

"Suppose we attempted even now to enter there—to see, to know at least"—

"At this hour? Are you mad? If we don't decide to break down the door, those witches inside will certainly never open to us. We must have patience; wait until morning."

"But what shall we do meantime? Leave this place? Not for anything in the world! Suppose to-night were the night when those cursed—No, Rocco, I will not move."

"You stay and I'll stay too. I have passed many nights like this in the open . . . and here, with you, to mount guard for that poor girl, it will seem like paradise to me."

They sat down at the foot of the wall, and continued to talk in low tones of what was in their minds, pricking up their ears and interrupting each other at the lightest sound; but all night no living soul passed through that solitary path. And Damiano, who, because he had held himself ready for everything, had also conquered the drowsiness that had oppressed him, began to think that perhaps his suspicions had been exaggerated, and that the persecutors of his family had not the heart to achieve this final crime.

When morning came, and they had assured themselves that there were some movements in the house, they boldly appeared before the door of the Retreat.

They rang. An old maid-servant, who had been engaged in sweeping the portico and the hall, opened the door and asked who it was. When Damiano gave his name and asked to speak with his sister, the woman, opening wide her eyes and drawing back three steps, twisted the lower ends of an ancient black headdress

and two little black curls, put her brush down on the ground, as if to examine the pair and said coldly: "You must be jesting. After what happened yesterday, to come here with that innocent air—it is a shame!"

Damiano spoke in a blunter manner and with growing agony, and Rocco raised his voice to assist his friend's explanations. The old woman shook her head. "It may be true," she said, "all you say may be true, but all I know is that the girl whom you gentlemen are in search of has created a great scandal. It is not for me to talk about it, to pass judgment. But all the same, it seems to me she had some merit of her own, with those saintly ways!" And as it seemed that the two young men would not be convinced she continued: "But, gentlemen, was it not one of you who yesterday, after our dinner, was seen here near the orchard and then disappeared? Who knows what is beneath all this? If one of you is her brother, he may know more than I do. She is gone. I can only pray for all poor sinners!"

Saying this, she led the two, who merely looked at each other in a daze, back to the entrance, and putting them out, shut the door upon them, then ran to inform the Superior of the attempt that two strangers had made to intrude into the Retreat.

Damiano paused for a moment in front of the house as in a dream, then, lifting his right hand in an attitude of mute despair, he drew a deep sigh and looked up to heaven. The two friends said nothing to each other. Leaving the place, thunderstruck by this unexpected blow, both were consumed by the same wonder as to what Stella might be doing at that very moment. Both deemed it would be useless to apply to the police; Damiano's sole hope was to find one or the other of the two scoundrels, having no doubt that this infamy was their work. He wished to track them, drag the truth out of them and to find out that very day, at any cost, even of a crime, where his sister was.

But the cold they had endured during that long October night, his excited thoughts, his very anger, had so thoroughly exhausted Damiano that he could no longer hold himself on his feet. Rocco affectionately supported him, but he knew not what to say. Seeing the doors of a church open he led his friend inside. Damiano let himself fall upon a bench. At that moment he recalled that on the last time he had seen Stella, her gentle persuasion had induced him to accompany her to the Lord's house, and it seemed as if the paroxysm of his anger had passed; he gathered his remaining forces, glanced affectionately at his friend, and feeling a need for prayer, sank upon his knees.

When they left the church he had decided what he would do. He thought it would be dangerous to tell his mother in her extremity, of this last blow, the most terrible that had yet befallen them. Moreover, before putting himself on the track of his sister's kidnappers, he deemed it well to open his mind to Don Theodore, in whom he had found a man truly strong and just. As they were not far from the Hospital, he flew thither, leaving Rocco on the neighboring bridge, and climbing up the stairs that led to the priest's room, he knocked gently.

Hearing no answer, and finding the door open, he entered softly. At the student's table in the other room he saw some one sitting whom he took for Don Theodore. He ventured to pronounce the name, but obtaining no response, he thought it might not be he. So he was emboldened to ask in a louder voice, "Will you please tell me whether Don Theodore will soon return?"

The person who sat there with his back toward the door, leaning his elbows on the table and his head in his hands, was startled by this question, turned round quickly, recognized Damiano and came running toward him. It was Celso, who threw himself into his brother's arms.

"Oh, Damiano! Blessed be the Lord!" he cried.

"You here? But how?"

"Oh, if you only knew! Don Theodore summoned me to my mother's bedside; she had told him all our troubles. I was far from here. I arrived only last night after a long journey. A letter from Don Theodore to my Superior acquainted me with the truth, and I came here at once to seek my poor mamma. This should have been my place!"

Damiano, to tell the truth, still cherished some resentment against his brother, for he thought that Father Apollinaris's insinuations had stifled his love for his own family, and that, weak and timid as he had always been, he had not been able to extricate himself from the cunning nets in which he had been entangled by his jealous patron. But Don Theodore knew in part, and partly guessed, how things stood, and he had succeeded in making some suggestions to Father Apollinaris, which the latter, for the present, did not deem it prudent to oppose. The priest had spoken in the name of a mother who wished to see her son before she died; his serious and sincere letter had succeeded at least in spoiling a plan which that representative of an occult power had long ago conceived.

"Oh, how many things I have to tell you, Celso! And mamma, have you seen her?"

"I was waiting here for Don Theodore to take me to her. After what has happened, I felt my heart failing me; but come, let us go together, Damiano. I would like you to see, to know what I feel. And now, tell me of Stella."

"Hush, for pity's sake!" That name, recalling the agony which for a moment he had stilled in his heart, was like a fresh wound.

A few minutes later Teresa saw both her sons once more. She could not say much, but she wept with relief. And her tearful eyes glanced around in search of Stella.

CHAPTER XLIII

EMERENZIANA'S PLOT

N the preceding day, toward the dinner-hour of the community, Stella had slipped out unobserved from the schoolroom in which she was working with her companions. Crossing a dark corridor, which by chance she found open, she descended into the garden, and, white as the kerchief that covered her bosom, hardly daring to breathe, she glanced backward at every step, terrified lest one of the teachers had noticed her disappearance.

That morning she had been seen holding a long conversation in great secrecy with a woman who called on her. This was Barbara, their neighbor in the house, who had undertaken to announce to Stella that her mother was sick and in danger of death; but she had been prompted to do so by another, who attached the greatest importance to the effect that might be produced by that announcement.

Stella, walking lightly over the grass along the walls of the enclosure, reached a door that opened on a blind alley with a low wall at the end. She lifted her eyes to heaven, as if to beg pardon for this step.

She drew forth a big key, which Barbara had secretly given her, and attempted to open the rusty padlock; but her little hands had not strength enough for the task. Terrified by the lightest creak of the lock, she was on the point of retracing her steps when, just as she was withdrawing her hand from the gate, she heard a voice that softly called to her from the outside. The chain yielded, the gate opened. The person who had called her, and who stood awaiting her, was Barbara.

She took Stella by her hand, saying, "Let us go, my child. I knew that you would come. Let us go together to your poor mamma."

Stella trembled like a leaf, and an involuntary shudder ran through her as soon as that woman touched her hand. A confused suspicion crossed her mind that it might all be a horrible deception. But she recalled the bitter words addressed to her that morning by the Superior when she had asked permission to go to her dying mother.

"Do you wish it?" she had answered. "But I do not wish it."

This remembrance restored the courage she had lost, and without thinking further on what she was doing, she allowed herself to be led away. Nor was she aware of a man in ambush not far away, who now quickly and cautiously hastened away along the enclosure.

Three o'clock struck; and Stella recalled that this was the hour in which her companions in the Retreat, having finished work in the school, would be filing out into the refectory on the ground floor.

"For the love of heaven, lead me home at once. I wish to be near my mother—I am dying of shame and fear," she pleaded.

"Don't make those wry faces. Are we not going toward home? Take care that people don't notice you. Don't talk, dry your eyes."

"And she expects me, does she not?"

"Certainly, haven't I told you so a hundred times?"

"Oh, if it were not that she asked for me."

"Yes, yes, come with me. You'll be glad you did."

They crossed the bridge at Porta Tosa. Thence, through the Corso and those little streets that lead to the Piazza Fontana, they approached the places so well known to Stella. She was not aware, and Barbara took good care not to enlighten her, that the mother was no longer there. She was eager to ascend to that humble fourth floor, where for so long a time they had hidden their poverty.

"But you say nothing of Damiano, of my brother,

What has happened? Is it true that they have set him at liberty?"

"But keep silent now."

"And my brother the priest? Will you not tell me all you know about him?"

"I have told you not to talk. You must not imagine that you are out of danger. It is no little thing to escape from a Retreat; and who knows"—

"Oh, heavens, but were you not there?"

"What is done is done! Now you must be prudent and let yourself be directed."

Stella, her heart beating with joy, climbed up the narrow stairs of what had once been her home, and on reaching the upper landing she ran forward, found the door open, precipitated herself inside, and flew into the other room crying, "Oh, mamma! poor mamma!"

But the alcove was deserted. A woman, whom at first Stella did not recognize, came forward to meet her.

"Come, Stella," she said, "I wish you no evil. This is now my house, and if you wish to stay with me"—

It was the Signora Emerenziana. The smile on her face as she spoke made Stella shiver.

"Oh, God in heaven!" cried the betrayed girl. "But where is my mamma? For the love of heaven, where is she?"

She turned round; Barbara was no longer behind her.

"Your mother?" said the old huckster, coolly, "your mother? Why, it's quite a while since she left this house."

"It is not true! But when? But how? I know nothing. Oh, where am I? Oh, mamma! where are you? I want to see her."

"Be quiet! Your mamma is sick."

"I want to go to her."

"And don't you know, my dear, that they have taken her to the hospital?" continued the other in a benevolent tone and with the same assumption of coolness.

The girl felt a sharp pain in her heart, and fell, as if dead, into the arms of the old woman.

Barbara now reappeared. Between them, the two women carried the fainting girl into adjoining rooms, which had been rented by Signora Emerenziana, together with the little apartment where our family had once lived. They laid her upon a cot in a little room with a low ceiling, and with only a dormer-window, which admitted a stray gleam of light.

Thus the plot woven so craftily, in such great secrecy, was even more successful than the conspirators had dared to hope. The enemy of Damiano could now congratulate himself indeed—he had succeeded in entrapping the girl into an abode of ill-fame.

The two women did not care that she had swooned. Indeed, they agreed that nothing more opportune could have happened, to relieve them of the annoyance which the first outburst of weeping must necessarily occasion. Having arranged her on the bed, they went out without another glance, and locked the door, giving no heed to a long sigh from the unhappy girl, who had just begun to return to life.

Two other old women of the neighborhood, putting their heads inside the door, asked for Signora Emerenziana; and the huckster, persuaded that it would be well to keep them in good humor, went to meet them with great cordiality and made them come in. Then she told them that she could not let them go without getting up a luncheon for her good friends. So she despatched one of them to the butcher, who had recently opened a store at the corner of the street, while she herself, with the others, set out to get things ready. From the pantry she brought forth pitchers and glasses, knives and forks and spoons. A few were broken, and most of them were odd pieces, come from all quarters to find themselves together in the huckster's shop. Very soon a great smoking head of cabbage, garnished with sausage and

other preserved meats, a shoulder of veal stuffed with nuts, and a flask of old wine, had been put upon the table. The four women sat down, and then began a chorus that would have put to the blush that of the witches in *Macbeth*—harsh and discordant voices; foolish and filthy conversation; villainous laughs; the munching of toothless gums; and every now and then screams like the cries of wild-cats. Above all the din rose the strident voice of the huckster, who to increase the mirth of the company undertook to tell in her own way the adventure with Stella.

The imprisoned girl, meanwhile, coming slowly to her senses, had raised herself on the hard cot. Finding that she was alone, and despairing of help, she leaped to the floor and searched around the room for an exit. Suddenly she stopped and listened, deeming it all a horrid dream from which she would soon awake to find herself in her mother's arms.

Then from the outer rooms penetrated to her ears the voices of the four old women and the rattling of tableware; and amid laughter and shouts she heard her own name pronounced.

She let her arms fall beside her frail body, and, clasping her hands, lifted to heaven her beautiful tear-laden eyes. Anyone that had seen her in that act would have felt a religious awe. She recalled the day when for the first time she guessed what snares, what perils lie before a poor girl who has no other gifts than honesty and beauty. She thought of her mother; of Damiano, whom she believed to be still in prison. She alone, were she at liberty, could save him, as she had saved him once before.

A little before midnight she heard the lock creak, and Signora Emerenziana, with a studied assumption of pity, came to ask her how she felt, whether she had rested, and whether she wished to eat or drink, telling her she should feel exactly as if she were in her own house.

She answered that she wished for nothing and for nobody; and that as soon as morning came, she would leave the house.

"And where can you go, poor child?" said the old woman, thinking the while that it might be all the better for herself not to have this weeping simpleton on her hands.

Stella would have died during that night, if her agony and delirium amid the phantasms that surrounded her had not so prostrated her that she was forced to throw herself once more upon her bed, where sleep, a brief comforter, descended to prepare her for a new prison.

But Damiano, when he was certain of his sister's disappearance, had not lost a moment. Leaving Celso at his mother's bedside, after making him promise to conceal from the weak and suffering woman this last misfortune, he ran in despair toward the palace of the *Illustrissimo*. He knew that there alone would it be possible to find any traces of him who had plotted and perhaps consummated this villainous scheme.

A few steps from the palace he encountered Don Theodore, who, seeing the youth so changed, so disordered in aspect, detained him and with a grave countenance asked what was the matter. At Damiano's first words, he saw that the case was serious. Not wishing to have as witnesses the indifferent passers-by, Don Theodore drew him into a deserted street at the side of the palace, and made him tell the whole story, to its minutest detail. When he heard the suspicions that frenzied Damiano's heart, he assured him he could not believe that the great and influential personage whom he suspected could stoop to so low and so dangerous an intrigue. He bade him calm himself, assuring him that he would take it upon himself to find out that very evening where Stella was. In short, Don Theodore told the lad to leave the whole affair in his hands, as he did not think it would be difficult to solve the mystery. Nor did he

conceal from him the fact that at that very moment he himself was on the way to have a talk with the Illustrissimo, for another reason of no light moment

But Damiano would not remain idle. So the priest advised both him and Rocco to put themselves in some other manner on the track of the fugitive; but without saying anything to any one, lest they might compromise the girl's good name. Then he told Damiano where he could meet him in the afternoon, and left him with these words:

"Be of good cheer, my son. There is One above who always watches over you."

CHAPTER XLIV

AFTER TWENTY YEARS

DON THEODORE knew that superb dwelling and that heir of a great name. He had found himself in his presence, under circumstances which the reader may not have forgotten, when after the death of the unhappy Marianna, mother of that child for whom he had vainly sought during long years, he had presented himself to the haughty nobleman, to fulfil the last wish of the dying woman. The good priest was more frequently in the houses of the poor than of the rich; he knew that he had been called to spend his life in assisting the oppressed, in humiliating the proud, wherefore his word was usually little acceptable to the ears of the great; but although he had, on this account, many enemies, they dared not declare themselves openly, perhaps because they feared that this would only make his triumphs the greater.

At his entrance into the antechamber of the palace, the servants looked at one another with a certain surprise, believing that the modest priest was some new

protégé of the lady of the house who had accidentally taken the stairs leading to the Illustrissimo's apartments. One of them, raising his elbow with a rustic gesture, said:

"You make a mistake, Signor Abbé—the other staircase."

"I make no mistake. I wish to speak to your master."

"We have as yet no orders from the Illustrissimo this morning."

"Go and ask him."

"That is not customary, Signor Curate, or whatever you may be," replied the lackey, without moving from the bench which he bestrode as if he were on horseback.

"If you will not announce me, I shall have to intrude myself upon him." The priest said this with such serious and disdainful dignity that the insolent servant, believing that he might be something more than he appeared to be, and fearing the consequences of the attitude he had assumed, deemed it well to ask one of his companions to find out from Rosso whether his master would concede an audience.

"Say that it is the Abbé Theodore, and that I come on a matter of some importance," added the priest.

While the other servant preceded him, Don Theodore, walking this way and that through the vast antechambers and the ancient gallery, thought on all the evil that had been wrought by a caprice of that powerful man to whom he was about to present himself. An unquiet glance which he occasionally cast at the door of the interior apartments betrayed his uncertainty and the tedium of waiting.

At the end of a good half-hour, the servant reappeared to say that though the Illustrissimo was occupied, and not much disposed to an audience, he would make an exception in his case. And with a certain respect, he invited the priest to follow.

The old patrician, wrapped in a soft brocaded morn-

ing-gown, was seated at ease in his armchair, leaning an elbow upon the desk, a precious bit of antique furniture, inlaid and gilded and surmounted by a bookcase encrusted with agate and lapislazuli. Of this masterpiece of the time of Francis I of France the Illustrissimo used to say in confidence that it was the gift of a great constable to one of his great-great-grandmothers, who was a famous beauty. The tray of silver which was near him, with a crystal cup and two small bottles containing a muddy or rather a whitish liquid, did not ill accord with his livid and clouded face. That morning he had risen later than usual, after a sleepless night, and to dispel a vague uneasiness he had been perusing some pages of a scandalous French romance of the past century, and an insipid political article of an official gazette which had fallen into his hands; then he had found nothing better to do than to vent his spleen upon any servant or dependent who happened to come near him. When the Abbé Theodore was announced he was still suffering from gloom and boredom, and was thinking of the flight of years and the ravages they had left behind them.

He remained in doubt for a moment; then, either in the hope of finding a new and different victim, or because of a sudden change of thought, he told the servant to bid the priest enter.

Don Theodore, having assumed a tranquil demeanor, bowed his head without speaking when the Illustrissimo motioned to him to take a seat. Twenty years had passed since these two men had confronted each other, in that very room. Don Theodore now came to appeal anew to that fiber in the patrician's heart which formerly he had appealed to in vain; but the Illustrissimo, in the mazes of a life cloyed with pleasures, inebriated with the fumes of riches, had forgotten the conversation and even the name which the priest had vainly hoped would awake an echo in the bottom of the old man's soul. Perhaps he imagined that this was some new acolyte from

his sister's court, some occult explorer from the enemy's camp; and it would have given him pleasure to snare the lady's ambassador in the same net which he would tender to him.

"And I shall be able to understand," he thought, "whether those people are still interfering in my affairs."

The Illustrissimo continued to keep silent. The priest at last decided to break the ice.

"I do not know, my Lord, whether I have the honor to be recognized by you."

"I recognize the Signor Curate, by name at least," very coldly answered the patrician, taking a pastille from an ivory box and placing it in his mouth.

"It is a long time since I have had occasion to speak to you, but I suppose—I hope that you have not forgotten me."

"In all conscience, I have not indeed!"

"It was twenty years ago. I came here in the name of—in the name of an unfortunate who died at that time."

He paused for a moment, but seeing a dark flush suffuse the old man's forehead as he leaned over and glanced fixedly at the priest, he continued: "In the name of an unfortunate, and to ask you for a reparation which"—

"Which? which? Be kind enough to explain yourself more clearly. I really do not know what story you may have come here to tell me; you priests always have stories of this sort to tell." And this he said in an angry voice while he eyed his visitor from head to foot, as if to show amazement at his extraordinary presumption.

"Do not show your disdain by any expression that you may come to think too strong. I know very well that if I only mentioned a name, you would not be so unjust as to insult a man who speaks to you truthfully and frankly. It is true that the years have made some changes in both of us, but what I wish to speak to you

about is not a thing that can easily be forgotten. Pardon me, therefore. This letter will make me known to your Lordship."

And taking out a paper, he placed it under the other's eyes. It was the letter written by the Illustrissimo's lawyer, at his command, in which Don Theodore was made trustee of the sum of six thousand lire for the benefit of a person known to him. The Illustrissimo threw a glance over it, and an involuntary shiver ran through his frame. He recalled the priest perfectly, and all the years that had passed from the first time he had seen him appeared a brief dream. The name of Marianna, forgotten, dead for so long a time, came mechanically to his lips, and Don Theodore was aware of it. He silently fixed a melancholy and piercing look on the wrinkled face of the Illustrissimo, who, contrary to his habit, knew not how to sustain the glance, and fretted because he could not find words to rebuke the presumption of this importunate visitor.

"My Lord," resumed the priest peacefully, with the manner of one who knows that he has reason on his side: "You have a great name, and in this world you walk among the highest: honor, fortune, illustrious birth, everything that is the dream or the envy of men—to you all have come as your right. But, for one man that triumphs here below, how many weep and suffer! The broad road is open before you; your every word is, for the little world that surrounds you, a law; every desire is an accomplished fact. Wealth gives power, and men still prostrate themselves willingly before that idol which has not again been overturned from its pedestal, and perhaps never will be—the golden calf! The few who stand in the high places rarely look down to inquire into the sufferings of the multitude, forced to grovel at their feet; they know not for what purpose wealth was given to them; on the contrary, they refuse to see that the fruit of their riches is too often the misery of others."

Excuse me, my Lord, if I speak without much subterfuge—you know what I mean.”

“I do not see—I do not know why you wish to make me a present of this sermon on the vanity of riches!” And restraining himself with difficulty, he smiled ironically. “I know that many of you gentlemen are accustomed to depreciate the things they cannot have for themselves.”

“I do not depreciate wealth, and I do not envy it. Wealth may be a gift from heaven, it may also be an anticipation of damnation. Nothing in this world should be valued for anything but the use to which man puts it. Gold cannot give you love, friendship, the sacred affection for your country, nor modest and tranquil virtue, nor the exercise of duty. Wealth is a good thing, but it is one of those good things which more than anything else corrupt the owner and corrupt others. Let us leave all this moralizing, however, hackneyed enough, if you will, but none the less true. It imports little to that which I have come to tell you.”

“Yes, spare me the Lenten sermon, Signor Curate! You may thank fortune that to-day I have no desire to exert myself, for I do not feel any too well; otherwise I might have begged you ere this to change your style.”

“I understand that I must seem importunate, but the motive that impels me, which I shall explain, must serve as my excuse. When, many years ago, I came to narrate to you the last moments of an unfortunate who, still young, was dying almost in desperation, leaving on earth a creature more miserable than herself, a child without name, without shelter, condemned to bear the burden of a shame and a fault not its own, you, my Lord, would not listen to me. You did little less than chase me from your antechamber. At that time it annoyed you to speak about misery. But you knew that you had grave reason to bewail a sin, and you afterward repented that you had not listened to me; it was then that

I received, by your orders, a small sum wherewith to provide for the little innocent, already adopted by public charity. Nor were you ignorant of this; for I myself assumed the duty of informing you how the child, entrusted to a family of peasants, had shortly afterward disappeared. You knew also that its poor mother was already dead, without the consolation of knowing whether the unfortunate little one were still alive. Meanwhile, the small capital held in deposit by me has increased and has now doubled itself."

"What you tell me may be all true, but it is a thing that does not touch me very closely; for I should have to keep in mind all the particulars."

"How?"

"If I thought well to send you some money to do a little good, I do not wish to claim any merit for it, nor to mix up any further in the matter; in short, you may do what you please with it; it could not be in holier hands."

The priest shook his head and continued: "That child, my Lord, lives. After long searching, after years and years of uncertainty, chance placed me on his track. I believe I have found him. The child is now a man, he is entirely ignorant of all the story of his origin. Lost in the country, he knew neither father nor mother; no one taught him a word of love; he grew up unintelligent, naked, savage; for months and years he did nothing but cry, all alone and ridiculed by every one. Because his small mentality disappeared little by little, he was nicknamed the poor lunatic. But there is One above who remembers everything. The God who blesses the sorrows of the oppressed was the invisible guide of the wandering boy; and from one village to another, from house to house, the poor unfortunate came at last to live in this city. I do not wish, my Lord, to weary your patience in telling you all that he did and suffered."

"It seems to be quite a little romance, dear Signor

Abate," interrupted the Illustrissimo, haughtily. "We must first find out whether it is all true, and above all"—this he said in a milder tone, and after a pause—"is there any evidence of the indenture of the child?"

"Proofs are not wanting, illustrious sir," replied the priest. "But, as for me, I do not intend to produce them. I do not intend to invoke the law, until conscience has spoken."

"That is a threat, I think. If you assume that tone, we shall reach no understanding." And he smiled, in such fashion that the priest came near losing the patience with which he had borne, without retort, the indifference and sarcasm of the Illustrissimo.

"I have come," continued Don Theodore in gentle and tranquil tones, "to supplicate you in the name of One who knows all, and by the memory of what has happened! Hearken—you still have time—to the last prayer of an unhappy woman, who is dead. For myself, it is neither my duty nor my intention to meddle in a sad affair of which I know all the particulars. Therefore, from me that poor boy will know nothing except that Providence has destined him to expiate here below the fault of his mother. But if from any other quarter he comes to learn the truth, if he puts forward any claim, any pretensions, if some day or other the world resounds with the details of a long and scandalous trial, a trial that cannot end without injury to the heir of a great house"—

"This is unheard of! Nobody has ever dared to talk to me in this manner. It is good that this sort of thing does not alarm me. And I swear to you by God!"—

"Swear by no one, my Lord. Deign to lend me your ear, allow me to finish. The lad of whom I am speaking, amid all his simplicity and ignorance, has preserved a great and generous soul; there are few like it in the world. He had found an humble, honest family, who did not deny him what he most needed, sympathy and

affection. He had found a friend, and for this friend he had made a sacrifice of his own liberty—he had offered up his life. Great and powerful persons brought these good people to ruin—an old mother in the hospital; a son barely declared innocent in a criminal trial, consequent upon the insidious trickery of assassins; a young girl persecuted and at this hour, perhaps—lost!”

So saying, the priest fixed his eyes on the Illustrissimo's face. The latter, seized by a fit of trembling which he could not hide, turned pale and stammered with an assumption of indifference:

“What story is this?”

“It is pretty nearly the story of every day,” continued the priest, his voice now suddenly broken and subdued. “Those who, like us—us who wear this habit—penetrate into the hiding-places of the poor, know how easy it is to rob them of their only, their last comfort, the peace of honesty; they know what tears are wrung from these humbled creatures by the illusion of a little riches; they see traces of the gold of the wealthy in the squalid dwellings of the people, sown there by seductions and caprices. Thus infamy passes from one generation to another. I know well that there is no lack of good men, that many among the rich do good, and that many who do it wish the fact to be known. Charitable institutions, largesses dispensed in the relief of humanity, form a just boast in our time, and have been an ancient and singular distinction of our city; but noisy benefactions are not those that better the world, and true charity resides in justice and in love.”

The Illustrissimo, bowing his head on his breast and plunged in thought, answered nothing to these serious words, which he certainly was not accustomed to hear. He was thinking of the strange development of this adventure, suffocated and forgotten for so many years, which had led to his rediscovery of a son in the very house where a little while ago he had gone in search of

a new victim. The emotion that disturbed his heart was perhaps compassion, perhaps even remorse, but against this inner voice his whole being aroused itself in indignant protest. And he really felt a failing of strength, a more rapid coursing of his blood, a cold in his members, a cloud over his thoughts, and, mingled with all this, an uncertainty of the morrow, and a great fear—the fear of death.

The priest had lost not a single one of the emotions of the man that stood before him, and, reading in his face the terror of his soul, he thought that, perhaps for the first time, all that was deepest in human nature was now perturbing the wealthy and corrupt patrician. And being sufficiently satisfied that the old man was experiencing these terrors, even without confessing it, he resumed in a more reverent voice:

“I recognize, my Lord, that I may have urged a just cause with overmuch heat; but you will pardon me, if it be true that I read in your heart a good inspiration. You can do good, and much good, to the family about whom I have come to speak; and piety and justice”—

“Oh, listen to me,” said the Illustrissimo, regaining his hauteur. “I know not what right you have to come here and offer me your censure, and disturb me with so many vain suppositions. I respect gentlemen of your cloth; but I am inclined to take the world as I find it. I, too, have done my share of good and of evil, like other sons of Adam; but I render no accounting to anyone, and I never have chosen you for my spiritual adviser. Spare me, therefore, any further counsels and, in exchange for such as you have already given me, I will give one to you. Take thought, next time, as to what you do and to whom you speak; do not deem the habit you wear a license to deal with one like me as you would with the first ruffian that casts himself at the feet of your confessional.”

“Sir,” replied Don Theodore, greatly grieved, “do not

deny the voice of your heart; do not send me away in this manner. You must know where that poor girl may be found; must know that a wicked and abandoned wretch has lured her by trickery out of the house where she had found a refuge; must know that your name is being put forward"—

"My name? By heaven! I am in no way mixed up in this affair. Now I know that she has been deceived." And he forced himself to assume an air of sneering indifference. "If, in assisting a girl to make a little money—through legitimate means, I would explain—by, for example, placing her on the stage, where, if she promises well, if she is pretty, she can lay up something while time is fleeting; if in doing all this, I repeat, I must draw down upon myself the reprisals of the entire inquisition, I may laugh at them all, it seems to me. So do not be vexed, and pity me! You see me nailed to this chair. I am punished enough, since in a single morning two birds of evil omen have sought me out, the doctor and the priest."

"You strive, my Lord, to deceive yourself, and to jest. But this is no time for such things. I must find the girl again. I must find her before evening."

"I know nothing about her, I repeat. If anybody is making free with my name for some purpose, for some scheme of revenge"—

"How, then? you acknowledge it?"

"Acknowledge what? I suppose, and, perhaps, I guess."

"What do I hear? Then it is true. And you can aid? But shall we be in time?"

"I repeat that I know nothing. I can see that this is all the work of an evil-minded person, who, I am well aware, is taking advantage of me also. As to whether we are in time, I don't know what to say."

"Oh, if it should happen"—and the priest sprang to his feet.

"I wash my hands of it all—of all that has happened and that may happen."

"Sir," broke in Don Theodore, "you will have to render an account to Him who laughs at the violence of men! The tears shed at the bidding of human authority are now what the blood of the martyrs was of yore. For you, also, the hour of death must strike, and in that hour"—

But the Illustrissimo angrily raised himself and said: "Put an end to this! Silence! And leave me once more in peace."

"Very good, may the Lord judge you! My duty calls me elsewhere, and I have not a moment to lose. Remember that a single hour, in which we think seriously about ourselves, may change an entire life."

With these words he departed, leaving the Illustrissimo in a sea of uncertainty and alarm, at once confused and resentful. After his departure, the patrician, feeling his pains increase, had not the courage to curse the priest that had dared to speak to him as no one had ever dared to speak, and had not feared to threaten him with the justice of Heaven.

CHAPTER XLV

THE SERPENT

HAN walks with giant strides in the path of crime. On the very day of the events narrated in our last chapter, Signor Omobono learned that Stella's flight from the Retreat was known to the lady patronesses, who, shocked at the bad example and full of zeal, could not fail, with all their quarrels, to raise a scandal in the entire congregation, and perhaps even to bring the matter to the knowledge of the authorities. Although fear suggested to

him the necessity of extreme prudence, Omobono could not resist the last temptation of revenge. He wished to accomplish it, however, after first protecting himself from any perilous consequences.

In the morning, after a night of terror and weeping, Stella no longer heard either voice or movement outside her prison. She dragged herself to the door and began to beat against it and to cry for pity. And the huckster, from whom, as it happened, Signor Omobono had just taken his leave, after perfecting his plans, did not turn a deaf ear to those prayers. She had promised to do as Signor Omobono dictated, though not without some hesitation. Had it not been for the hope that she would soon rid herself of the young woman, as well as of the old man and of all the entanglements into which he had plunged her, she never would have promised.

She entered the room with a kindly and compassionate air, saying that she had not forgotten Stella, and was come to bring her breakfast. And she set on the table a tray with a cup of coffee and milk and a bit of bread.

The girl ran toward her, threw herself at her knees, weeping and begging her to let her go. The old woman, feigning pity, assured her that everything was quite right, and that a good woman of her acquaintance would soon arrive to conduct Stella to her mother.

"In the meanwhile," she added, "do not abandon yourself in this fashion, my child: you must eat something, you have fasted twenty-four hours, for even last night you refused to take anything. Listen to me; drink at least this hot coffee."

The girl had so much need of hope that she began to give credence to these lying words, and feeling really faint she took the cup from the old woman's hands; but as she could not swallow a mouthful of bread, she contented herself with drinking a little coffee and milk. A few minutes later, either as the effect of the long struggles of the previous night, or a sudden tightening of the

heart, she felt her eyes clouding, her limbs freezing, and struck by vertigo she let herself fall upon the nearest chair, and lay as if in a swoon.

The huckster took no pains to help her, but flew to the next room, and, throwing open the window that looked upon the street, clapped her hands two or three times. Though the signal came thus from a height, it appeared that someone was expecting it, for a man below made a sign, and a hired carriage drove around from behind the corner of the street. Then, casting a hurried glance all round, he disappeared into the entrance of the house.

In less than a quarter of an hour he reappeared, with another man behind him, carrying a girl in his arms, with a dark shawl drawn across her face and wrapped round her body. A lodger in the house, who had thrust out her head as they passed, had simply taken it for granted that it was some poor person taken out to die in the hospital, and, being well used to such scenes, she did not even gossip about it with the neighbors.

The two men reached the carriage, one opened the door, and the other laid the girl gently inside. She appeared to be asleep rather than in a swoon. Then the first man said a word to the coachman, who nodded, and whipped up his horses.

When Stella awoke from her long sleep the sun was high in the heavens. She looked around, dazed and still oblivious, and could not imagine where she was. She thought she had been dreaming, that she was still dreaming.

She was in a large, square, gloomy room. A few old worm-eaten chairs, covered with faded yellow damask, furnished it. At one side was a table, at the other a massive sofa upon which she had just awakened. The walls were bare; the general appearance was one of decay. The sole ornament of the musty room hung on one of the walls, over the old sofa. This was a huge,

blackened picture, representing an old gentleman in knightly garb, erect and severe in the attitude of command.

Stella had run to the single balcony, where a pale light entered the room. She saw below the walls of an ancient enclosure, abandoned gardens, great trees, from which yellowing leaves were blown about by the wind. At a little distance she saw a group of poor houses. From their roofs came a few streaks of whitish smoke, and around them were fields and meadows crossed by ditches, and divided by long rows of willows and leafless poplars, and far away, beneath an ashen sky, could be discerned the white spires of the Duomo.

This window from which the frightened and bewildered girl looked out was far up and was on one side of an ancient square edifice, which had formerly been the tower of a castle. The castle in large part was no longer standing, although the front of the edifice appeared to have been restored in the heavy architectural fashion of two centuries ago, and transformed into a sort of miniature palace.

To this solitary and abandoned palace, which was a few miles outside of the city, and belonged to the Illustrissimo, had Omobono ordered Stella to be taken and delivered up to the patronage of that powerful gentleman.

When, recalling everything, she was able to understand or rather to realize dimly the truth; when she thought over all that had happened, which to her was still wrapped in inextricable mystery, she recoiled with horror, and, burying her face in her trembling hands, she broke into loud weeping. Solitude, fear, the certainty that however she might cry or scream no one could hear her, no one would come to her rescue, the aspect of the place, the chill that ran through her limbs, and finally the sinister glance that seemed to fall upon her from the portrait of the old knight—everything and every thought increased the agony of her mind and

drove her to despair. She repeated the names of her mother and her brothers, and then wept and recommended herself to the Blessed Virgin, and hoped once more.

Some hours passed. The heaviness in the head, the torpor that had oppressed her a while ago, so that she could not explain to herself how or when she had been taken from the huckster's rooms to this unknown and deserted place, now assailed her again, and, no longer able to keep her feet, she threw herself once more upon the disordered cushions of the sofa. Darkness was slowly closing in upon the room, and at a short distance could be heard the faint strokes of a bell.

A confused noise in the rooms below, the question and reply of two excited voices, and the sound of a footstep on the stairs, roused Stella out of her lethargy, which for a moment had deprived her of all recollection of her peril. She raised herself to a sitting posture and listened. Her heart beat wildly, she hoped that somebody would come up, even if it were her unknown persecutor.

She had not been deceived. It was the step of a man ascending to that room. The door opened. Although she had not seen him for a long time, she immediately recognized Signor Omobono. He advanced with grave face, with his hands clasped at his breast, in an attitude of great compassion. But Stella did not dare a second time to raise her eyes to his. She trembled in every fiber, her heart was overcome with the fear of finding herself defenseless in the power of that old gentleman who had already come into her poor home to deceive her under pretense of protection. Now the sight of Signor Omobono changed doubt into certainty, she found herself face to face with him who had been the artificer of all her woes.

Omobono stopped a little distance from the sofa, from which the girl had not the strength to rise.

"Do you know me?" he asked. "Oh, how is it I find

you here? But I am your friend; fear nothing, poor girl!"

"No, no, you are a deceiver! It is not true! I have been betrayed! Oh, God help me!"

"Calm yourself! Listen to me. I have come to assist you."

"No, it is not true. It is you who have done me all this harm! Why am I here? Why do you come here?"

"I pity you, after a fright such as you may have experienced. But be of good cheer—listen."

"No! no! What evil have I done that I should be treated in this manner? I have harmed nobody. And they have brought me here by force; they gave me something to drink—I lost my mind—what happened to me, God only knows."

"But who wishes to do you any harm? You are here in a safe place; no one will touch a hair of your head."

"I want to go to my mother. I"—

"That's right."

"Let me go! Let me go! Oh, all this is driving me mad."

"Listen to me, and don't alarm yourself so. I, as you know, have always wished well to your mother and yourself. And I can do much."

"Impostor! Impostor! All the harm you could do you have done. And it does not suffice you. I know very well what you think. I know! I know! And I look in your face and tell you so!"

"This fury will pass, and I shall still be able to do you some good."

"Holy God, Thou wilt give me the strength to resist!"

But here she began to weep, and, throwing herself at the feet of that man, she attempted to move him with agonized prayers.

"Oh, why do you wish that a poor creature like me should be lost, sacrificed forever? What have we done

to you? I have been separated from my mother—when she wanted me, when she had nobody else. I wished to return home. Oh, if you are not wicked, if it be true that you have returned here not to do me harm, look upon me with a little compassion, take me to my poor mother. See, I weep. I will kiss your hand, I will pray the Lord for you!”

“Yes, yes, but be quiet. Do not cry so loud. You will return to see your mother.”

“Ah, you come to tell me that—you console me—don’t let me think that you are making sport of me.” And raising herself from her knees, Stella made for the door.

“Wait a moment! Where do you think of going? To your mother? Not yet. It will not be possible before to-morrow morning. Now you are here, you are safe, nobody wishes to harm you. Besides, your mother does not yet know what has happened.”

“Oh, my God!”

“Trust to me. I think”—

“No, no, I will get out of this place.”

“Be reasonable. Don’t oblige me”—

“Oh, let me go away!” And like a thing of despair, she again precipitated herself toward the door.

But Signor Omobono, who watched the girl’s every movement, was quick to intercept her, and changing voice and manner, he cried in wrath:

“Wait! You cannot go out without me. If you move, you die!”

CHAPTER XLVI

THE WAGES OF SIN

AT these words, at that frenzied gesture of menace, Stella lost all doubt, all hope. She saw herself alone, defenseless, lost. There was no escape from the hands of that monster save by death, by throwing herself out of the window.

This desperate thought crossed her brain, but turning to fix bewildered eyes upon her persecutor, and seeing the evil sneer that parted his lips, she felt a return of courage and strength.

She no longer strove to fly; she no longer retreated; but, motionless, pallid, crossing her arms upon her breast, she stood before him. She did not speak, but her look seemed to say: "I do not fear you; I despise you!"

At that moment the barking of a dog sounded in the courtyard. Signor Omobono shook himself, pricked up his ears, and knitting his brows, muttered, "Who can be coming?" To the cries of the dog succeeded a confused, far-away sound, as of men endeavoring to break in by force. Little by little the noise increased, threatening voices were heard, and the sounds of doors violently beaten down and running feet.

A flash of ineffable hope illumined the girl's face, but immediately disappeared, and a greater fear, the expectation of something more terrible froze her heart. That ruthless man still fixed her with his evil glare, a mingling of rage and fear. Then, no longer able to endure that torture, she once more sank upon her knees and prayed and wept, but her words grew confused, and when she could no longer speak, she still seemed with her clasped hands, and her imploring eyes, to ask compassion on her innocence.

"Why are you praying now?" asked the man with an ironical sneer. "Why do you throw yourself upon your knees? Do you not know that on your account I have been insulted, driven away like a dog? Don't you know that I shall have to show you what I can do? You had a brother, you had a mother. And I—I decided that you no longer should have either brother or mother. She is dying in a hospital, he is languishing on prison straw. And you are here with me, and nobody can snatch you away. You may pray as much as you please in the name of God, it will be all the same!"

He had not quite finished these words, when, from the floor below could be heard a voice crying, "Stella! Stella!"

It was the voice of Damiano!

The girl raised her arms to heaven, and with a scream of joy flung herself toward the door, near which Omobono stood as if turned to stone.

In that terrible moment, he gave himself up for lost. Yet he would not renounce his revenge. He drew forth a knife, and struck at Stella, who, in a daze, had thrown herself upon him. But, in his blind fury, his blow failed and only grazed the girl's elbow. Stella fainted at the assassin's feet, and falling backward struck her head against the corner of a low wardrobe near the entrance. The villain, seeking only his own safety, fled from the room. He disappeared at the very moment that Damiano and Rocco, who had discovered the secret stairway in the upper story, precipitated themselves into the passage which led to the larger rooms of the tower.

While Rocco stopped to guard the stairs, Damiano burst open the door and saw his sister lying on the floor. She gave no sign of life. Blood bathed her face and her dress, and stained the floor; he thought she was dead, assassinated. At the cry he uttered, Rocco rushed in. They raised her to a sitting posture, and while Rocco went in search of water, Damiano assured himself that her heart still beat.

At that moment a dull tramping came to their ears. Damiano, impelled by anger, and by the hope of discovering traces of the assassin, recommended his sister to Rocco with a look, and rushed out of the door like a flash. Groping furiously along the walls of the passage they had first entered, he felt a door yield, and plunged on through those unknown ways until he found himself in a low-studded vault full of stones and bricks, at the other end of which he dimly saw something moving—it looked like a man crawling on all fours. Pulling out

a pistol which he had concealed, he sprang furiously in the direction of the cowering object, which could be none other than the supposed murderer of Stella. But he had gone only a few steps into that den where only a ray of reflected light from a slanting roof penetrated the gloom, when he imagined he had been mistaken. He saw nothing at the other end. Still he rushed on, the worm-eaten planks creaking under his feet, when suddenly he heard the sound of a fall, a howl of despair, and then there was silence.

The justice of God had punished the seducer of innocence. Signor Omobono, when he knew he was discovered, had fled, but finding that he was followed even to his hiding-place, he crawled through a small window and let himself down several feet of the exterior wall to a balcony on the floor below. Here, finding all ingress closed, and seeing no other place where he could hide, he risked an attempt to reach the new part of the palace, where he would be safe from pursuit. In order to arrive there, he had to attempt a difficult and perilous path across a platform projecting from the side of the tower. He had not reached the middle of it before his foot slipped, he felt one of the boards loosening beneath him, and fell backward, clutching wildly in his fall at the joists and the scaffolding, but in vain; the loosened board had become detached and now knocked him on the head, precipitating him to the foot of the palace, under the very windows of that room where he had intended to complete his crime. He survived for a few hours, living long enough to be taken on a stretcher to the city, where he died in the Hospital, after making legal attestation before a notary of all that had happened, of his own guilt and the innocence of those whom he had persecuted. The priest that heard his confession was the Abbé Theodore, and amid the terrors of moribund agony, the words of pardon came like a voice from heaven to the dying man.

It is necessary now to explain at length how Damiano and Rocco, after they had left the Abbé Theodore, had succeeded in finding traces of the fugitive girl and of her kidnappers. The first and best inspiration had come to Rocco, for, while Damiano in his rage was devising the strangest projects, Rocco knew how to find the straightest way and the best means for unearthing the truth. In a hasty visit made to the old huckster, who on her side had already repented the share she had taken in this iniquity, he soon came to understand even more than was necessary for the moment. Then the two companions, without losing a minute, had left the city and run to the palace, where Damiano, entering by force, for the second time was able to rescue his sister.

When Damiano learned of the miserable end of him who had been for so long an angel of evil to his family, he felt all hate die out of his heart, and pity succeed to a desire for revenge. But neither Stella nor her mother ever heard all the horrid particulars. Damiano wished to take his sister far away from the places that were reminders of all these events. Once restored to her own, Stella, saved as by a miracle, had no other care, no other thought, than that of helping her already convalescent mother, and making her forget the sad days of the past.

But those who, hiding in the shadow, had mainly plotted that odious intrigue, the men of the fashionable world who were not ashamed to have a hand in those petty tragedies with which the law rarely concerns itself, and which they facetiously discuss in their superior style where jest and story circulate—these gentlemen never paused to see the finger of God in the death of a man whom they had often shaken by the hand, and for whom they had often professed esteem and friendship. Indeed, they never spoke of him at all.

Even by the poor family whose story we have told, he was speedily forgotten. Other and more unhappy creatures, born in misery, bred in humble alleys, deserted in

their ignorance, amid the perils of youth and the temptations of poverty, were tricked for a brief period into furnishing temporary amusement for the boredom of rich idlers, and wept and died! Betrayed, and then derided, they had looked upon life as only too easy when they had hoped to forget the hovel in which they were born and the bread of honest toil.

Even they tasted a moment of intoxication, and the capricious pride of fortune, but the roses which they entwined in their hair faded away, and they found themselves alone, until the squalor of want assailed them, and then they lost all shame and remorse and turned readily to crime! Meanwhile the heroes of these love-episodes continued their gay suppers and their triumphant galantries, and were envied by many, and many of the queens of fashion and of beauty did not disdain the courtship of the youngest and most fortunate of these conquerors.

Don Theodore, that rare man who had already done so much for Damiano and his family, persuaded him to leave the city as soon as possible, and establish himself with his family in some quiet and distant village. To Rocco he consigned the capital he had held in trust for so long a time. It had increased to twelve thousand lire, to which the Illustrissimo had added six thousand more after their last interview, with the simple instructions to do as he pleased with the money. Rocco, at sight of so much gold, was at first thunderstruck, then he refused it, declaring that he would not touch a penny without knowing from whose hands it came. Nor was it an easy thing for Don Theodore to convince him that it was his duty to thank God for his good fortune and inquire no further. At last the lad took the good priest's hand, kissed it, and said:

"Oh, teach me how to use it, and calm my heart with one of those words which I have never heard from anyone save you."

CHAPTER XLVII

ROCCO'S DREAM

DAY was breaking. Here and there twinkled the last stars, seemingly lost in the azure of the sky. Not a cloud was visible.

A young man leaning against a withered and almost dead oak tree was contemplating the beautiful scene from an altitude. On one side, at a short distance, he could see fifty houses in a long row, gleaming through the trees. A little to one side was the church. Thence stretched the roads of the valleys and the mountains.

That village is in a remote and tranquil corner of Lombardy, nearly in the center of one of the prettiest and most picturesque valleys between the first spurs of the Alps, open out a little above Varese, and extend to the solitary shores of Lake Lugano. The stubborn soil and the scarce population force the inhabitants to live in that poverty-stricken independence which is unknown to their brethren of the plain.

In one of these houses Teresa's family had been living for nearly six months. Fortune had smiled upon the good intentions of the Abbé Theodore, and he had been really a father to our friends. Through him the Abbé Celso had at last been able to free himself from the terrible protection of Father Apollinaris, who, thinking that the opportune moment had arrived, had begun to speak privately with the lad, exhorting him to enter a religious house of his order in another country. Don Theodore seriously questioned the youth as to his vocation, and speedily found that if he had not yet learned to resist the counsels of Father Apollinaris, it was through mere timidity. So he determined to withdraw him from that influence. He succeeded, despite the opposition he met with at first, by declaring that he would bring the case

before a person to whom the father, powerful as he might be, must defer. Then arose a petty war, dogged and venomous, of all the nobleman's party against the good priest. A little benefice assigned to Celso finished that skirmish of parlor politics. Don Theodore then succeeded in securing for Celso permission to finish his theological studies in the seminary during the year that was still to elapse before he was admitted to orders. Meanwhile, Celso had come to spend a few days in the village with his family.

In this neighborhood Rocco had purchased a snug little farm to make an honest investment of the little capital that Don Theodore had procured for him. Managed with economy, that bit of property sufficed to let all the family live at ease; for Rocco now considered himself one of the children of Teresa, and insisted on sharing with his new family what the goodness of God had provided. Damiano, however, could with difficulty adjust himself to the idea of their making a home together. It was necessary that Don Theodore should in great secrecy confide to him a bit of his own mind, to make him reconsider his obstinate refusal. He had no further objection to urge when Don Theodore, coming expressly from Milan to pay a visit to the old curate of the village and to his new friends, called him apart and put into his hands a document from the Communal assembly, which had appointed him schoolmaster, at two hundred and thirty lire a year, conditioned, however, upon his becoming a resident of the village. The obscure but certain and honest livelihood thus offered him, and his duty as a son, made it imperative that he should accept, although in his heart he did not respond as cheerfully as he would have wished to this proof of confidence.

The family lived in a little house close to the property of the benefice. A short distance away another little house, more modern, more comfortable, overlooked from a gentle slope, a fine extension of meadows. A vine-

yard, belonging to this last house, was fully exposed to the noonday sun, a bit of woodland lay in the path of the north wind. In all these were seventy acres of land on which the eye could rest with delight at the varied beauty of the scenery. This was Rocco's modest possession. But the house was closed, and was bare of furniture.

The young man who that morning was standing in contemplation of the rising of the sun was Damiano. A few drops of dew, falling upon him from the knotty branches of the tree against which he was leaning, did not awake him from his reverie. Since he had found himself in that serene asylum of the fields, he had entirely changed. His dear ones saw him set out on solitary expeditions, when he would thoughtfully pace the borders of the little lake, sometimes even shunning the company of the only friend of his heart, the good Rocco, who could not understand why so strange and painful a mood had been born in him. Rising usually an hour before daybreak, he would climb the slope, whence he could see almost the entire length of the valley. There he frequently remained for hours. When the village bell rang the call to school, he descended to the damp and uncomfortable room where fifteen or twenty youngsters were seated on rough benches, with the primer and the writing-pad in their hands. At his entry they hushed themselves into subjection, and stood in much greater awe of him than of the village priest. He talked little, nor did he give much thought to what these poor children could learn from him, being only mindful to live up to the very letter of his contract. Often the children saw him sitting with his elbows on the table, and a book in front of him, open at one page for a long time, while a silent tear occasionally dropped upon the ragged volume.

When at noon he reappeared at the house, Stella, serene and self-contained, was the first to come forward

and greet him. Rocco, from the adjoining orchard, also ran to give him a joyous handshake. Celso in those days did his best to be companionable, and Mamma Teresa left the oven to tell him a hundred little things that might entertain him. To every repetition of those affectionate demonstrations he responded with all possible tenderness and kindness; but within himself he felt a void, and a thousand diverse emotions continually agitated him. It was a mysterious torment, greater than any he had ever experienced. He heard his brother and sister, he heard his mother and his friend, hopefully discussing the future, blessing Heaven for the fate it had sent him; but he could not share in that trust, that contentment. In the evening he would take a walk with Stella and Rocco, while Celso lagged behind to sustain the footsteps of the mother. All the others discussed the past, and congratulated themselves upon the present. He, on the other hand, felt a secret anger, an inexpressible bitterness, a sense of being useless to himself and a burden to others. None of his family ever had been able to read into the depths of his heart, and they knew not what to think of him, especially when occasionally they heard him say: "I have nothing to desire; your happiness is my own."

Until this time he had hardly understood the secret sorrow that consumed his youth. That continual battle of thought against whatever he saw succeed in the world, the disillusion he had suffered, and the necessity of hiding, of suffocating the most generous impulses of his soul, had in a short time prostrated him into the silent inertia of one who has nothing left to love.

"To what have I been led by all that I have hoped and attempted?" he asked himself. "That magic of beauty which animated me to win a name among men, is now dissipated; I have exchanged my vanity for a real vocation. I had imagined that I might emerge from the crowd, and the first attempt has tumbled me down to

the lowest rung of the ladder. Still, it may all have been for the best. Now my mother can end her days in peace, and my sister also will be happy, certainly much happier than I. They cannot comprehend what torments me. I have seen so many suffer and be silent like myself, I had hoped to call them brothers, even in misfortune! And the ardent sentiment that makes me love this beautiful heaven, this earth upon which I was born, must it all be useless? Why can hatred, and ambition and revenge be satisfied, and not love? Weariness, the necessity of toiling in order to live, made me forget this hope. Now it is no longer so, and thought itself is a torment. Here I am alone, unoccupied, good for nothing either for myself or for others, and what I feel in my soul may seem to-day like light from heaven and to-morrow a delirium!"

One day after devouring a little volume during his favorite promenade upon the hilltop, he had sat down upon the damp ground, and new but more assured and more ardent thoughts arose in his mind. For two hours he had been reading and thinking. No other words had escaped him than these: "At least, my death will not be as useless as my life."

At that moment he heard somebody approaching. Seeing that it was Rocco, who was ascending the wooded path, he hid his book, rose confused and agitated, and stepped out to meet him.

"Damiano," said his friend, "I was afraid you might have lost yourself in the woods, as you occasionally have done, after leaving us without a word. I determined to seek you, because you are my brother, and I have something to tell you—something that I no longer can keep to myself."

"I know your secret, Rocco, I have known it for some time," answered Damiano, smiling. "You love Stella, and you think that if she were"—

"How? Do you then know it?" said Rocco, startled.

"Not only do I know it, but I think it would be a blessing of Heaven upon her and upon all of us. Your heart is so good, so generous, and my sister knows your goodness, even if I never had told her anything about you, nor of your honest hope."

"Damiano," his friend interrupted him with trembling voice, "I know that that angel from heaven probably never has had a thought in the world for a poor devil like me. And I perhaps would have died rather than speak—but a word, a single word"—

"Which I had already read in her heart, long before you did."

"Oh, if you knew! Some days ago, last Monday, we were sitting together down there on the bridge over the milldam; you were paying no attention to us; and the mother, as usual, was giving me a piece of her mind, because, as you know, she still looks upon me as an eccentric, and says I always want to have my own way, and that it is almost a sin that a small fortune rained down upon me from heaven. You know how the good mamma talks! I did not know what to answer; and Celso let her talk on. Then Stella took my part, and said this, yes, just this: 'Don't scold him, mother. I love him,' and she turned red and suddenly added, 'almost as if he were my own brother.' Oh, she never had said this before, no, never! And from that moment it has seemed to me that I have been in a dream. I know no longer what I do or say, and I am almost afraid of becoming insane. But the more I think of it the more I feel that the thing is impossible, and that, in short, it were better for me to go away."

"To go away? But why?"

"Yes, yes, Damiano. How can I stay here any longer after hearing Stella say that—she cared for me, as for you?"

"But are you not my brother?"

"Yes, and I can be nothing more than your brother and hers. Now I know what at first I had not the courage even to imagine."

"Well, now"—

"I must go away, because I no longer have the heart to look upon her without thinking."

"Take courage, Rocco mine, listen to the promptings of your own heart. I will speak to Stella for you; and, believe me, she will thank heaven."

"No, no, in charity tell her nothing—or at least not yet. How can it do her any good to know that I want her—I, awkward and ugly, crippled of an arm, without family, without a name, all alone in the world?"

"How, do you then deny our home? Are we no longer anything to you? O Rocco, we owe everything to you, and whatever we could do would be a small thing in comparison with what you have done, and"—

"I cannot acknowledge that this is true. But as you are my friend, I wish to tell you everything. Oh, if you could guess the thoughts that are boiling in my head!—it is useless! everything is as good as finished. No—no—I am not sincere with you. I have still a glimmer of hope, but I have not the courage to speak."

"Be frank, Rocco, hide nothing from me. I know that you think justly."

"Listen, then. You can give me some advice, or tell me openly that I am crazy. This is what I have thought of doing; and if you, after hearing me, will not say me nay—Enough! what must be, must be."

"What do you wish to do? Tell me."

"I will go to Milan to-day, in a few minutes. I will speak to Don Theodore. I will kneel before him and conjure him to tell me the name of my father, or at least that of my mother, so that I may no longer be the son of nobody. Perhaps there is still a little justice and compassion in this world, and the poor abandoned one may find some recompense for all he has lost. Yes,

Damiano, tell me whether it is not just that I should know my own family, that I should recover my own name? I will then return here, and if you think the little that I can share with you is enough to win a home among good and honest people, I will go and speak to our mother and ask her if she would be content to accept me as really her son. And you will tell Stella that I—that no one can ever love her as I do.”

Saying this, he drew a long sigh, as if a weight had fallen from his heart. Damiano, who perceived a great and exalted virtue in the strange but delicate desire of Rocco's to possess a name before he would unite his destiny with Stella's, could not make him renounce this proposed journey to the city. It was agreed that nothing should be said about it until his return; and Rocco, under pretense of looking after a small balance of his capital that was still in Don Theodore's hands, set off without losing an hour.

CHAPTER XLVIII

SMILES AND TEARS

ROCCO remained away two days. On the morning of the third day he returned, driving in a hired carriage as far as Varese, and thence continuing afoot through the lonely valley. He walked slowly, thinking it might be the last time he would ever look upon these beautiful scenes. But why did they no longer seem all they had been? A sadness, deeper than that which had darkened his life of old, and almost overturned his reason, had now fastened upon his heart. In all the homeward journey he had exchanged no word with anyone. Once he had been asked what province he was from. He had raised his head, stared fixedly at the stranger who had asked the inno-

cent question, and laughed in his face with a bitter and jeering laugh. The stranger took him for a madman. For the latter part of the journey on the Alpine slope, he never halted a moment for breath, except once, when he paused to drink from a stream at the beginning of the valley.

The sun was low when he arrived at the mill, and sat down upon the bridge where he had seen Stella for the last time before his departure. He felt incapable of taking another step.

But soon he saw Damiano coming toward him. Evidently Damiano had expected him. Rocco ran forward to meet him, threw his arms around his neck, but could not utter a word.

"What's the news, Rocco? What is it? Tell me, take heart. Are you no longer yourself? Are you not my brother?"

"Oh, Damiano," the other began after a while, in a suffocated voice, "another day or two, and I never shall see you more!"

With much hesitation and indescribable bitterness he related the ill-success of his attempt. On arriving at Milan he had run to find his benefactor. The latter, who had read Rocco's soul from the first time he met him, and already divined his secret, smiled upon the ingenuous and impassioned love-story that he narrated. But when Don Theodore learned on what errand the youth had come, when he saw him forcing down his tears, and knew that at any cost he wished to learn the names of his parents, then the priest became serious and thoughtful; he was silent, and found no answer to hand. Perhaps the affection which for so long a time had linked his fate with that of the poor lad made him argue that it might still be possible with a word of justice and of expiation to overthrow the base prejudice which absolves the sinner and the infamy which hides behind the mask of conventionality. Good and self-deceived

soul! With all his experience of men and things, he still deemed it possible that this rich man, hardened in vice, might to-morrow be better than he was yesterday. For indeed—he thought—man is not destined for evil, and he can find rest only in justice. And he imagined in so thinking that he had reason on his side.

Bidding Rocco farewell, and asking him to return the next morning, the priest once more gathered the papers relating to the obscure birth of the child, his disappearance, and the long search for him. Turning these over once more, he could not help recognizing how difficult it would be not only to establish the rights allowed by law to those unfortunates who come unbidden into the world, but even the identity of the youth in legal form. The scandal of a lawsuit, moreover, was very repulsive to him. Nevertheless, if the Lord willed it so, it must be all for the best.

Next morning Rocco was duly on hand. Don Theodore made him sit down beside him. He took his hand lovingly, and confided to him what grave and insurmountable reasons opposed themselves to his desire; he told him that the man to whom he could not give the name of father, had rejected him forever, and that it would not be difficult to find an only too valid defense against any pretensions put forth by the aid of the law. Thus, little by little, he came to talk to him about his mother. He explained that she had died weeping and praying for him, and, as a sacred pledge, he confided to him the name of that unfortunate, a name forgotten by everybody on earth.

The youth did not weep, he did not move, he did not even quiver an eyelid at this narrative. He hung on the priest's words, and in his clear, fixed eyes one could read his whole soul. When Don Theodore ceased speaking, Rocco fell on his knees, and lifting his face up to Heaven, he retired within himself as if in the act of making a vow which God alone should overhear. Then

he said aloud: "Blessed be God, since my poor mother loved me!"

That very day, toward evening, he visited the graveyard where Don Theodore told him the remains had been taken, twenty years before. But he did not find the cross, he did not find the grave, nor was it given to him to weep over the earth that covered the body of the unfortunate one from whom he derived his life and his unhappiness.

Returning homeward, his resolution was taken. He would say good-by to Damiano, give him all he possessed, and go far, far away, there to wait until God called him to his mother. But as soon as Damiano learned of this project, which would have overturned all the plans he himself had been maturing in those days, he was so urgent in his antagonism that Rocco ended by promising he never would abandon the family. Still, neither that day nor the next, nor the day after, did he allow himself to be seen in the little home.

Damiano had received a letter from Don Theodore which counseled him to do what he could in assisting Rocco's courtship of his sister, provided she were willing and was in love with no one else. He said that this was a reward destined by Providence, and reminded him, though this indeed was unnecessary, of all that the excellent lad had done for him. He added that although Rocco was not a handsome youth, such as Stella might have aspired to, nevertheless his good and honest face would not be entirely eclipsed in her beauty, and he finished his letter in these words:

"I have lived many years, and my experience has been wide. Remember, my son, what the greatest book in the world says: 'There are three things pleasing to God, the concord of brothers, the love of one's neighbor, and man and woman who are well mated.' I see the hand of God in this union; it is He that leads the innocent child to make amends for the sin of his father."

Damiano did not pay much attention to these final words—which probably he did not understand—in his joy at finding that this good man responded to the wish in his own heart.

At twilight, when the family found themselves gathered under the shady chestnut tree which protected the humble dwelling, and during one of those silences which awaken dear memories and make one appreciate better the enchantment of nature, Damiano, who sat between Stella and his mother, said:

“Do you remember, mamma, that night when father died, and the promise I made to him, when he gave us his benediction? I took it upon myself to supply his place, to preserve his name unspotted, to do all for you. I had too much confidence in myself then. I have been able to give you only poverty and anxiety. But at least I can say we have been honest! What I ought to have done, Rocco has done for me, and more than I does he deserve to be your son.”

Rocco, who had held himself apart, apparently paying no attention to anything, leaped furiously from his seat at Damiano's first word, and disappeared behind the hedge of acacias that ran along one side of the little lawn. Stella lowered her modest eyes, waiting until the others should have divined what was no mystery to her, but her heart beat rapidly, and her face, which had not yet lost a certain pallor, now grew crimson. Her black eyes, her dark hair, which was arranged in two plaits around her head, and a thin gown of rose-colored percale, gave her an indescribable grace, and made her positively beautiful through her expression of sweet shyness, which is the dearest jewel of youth.

“Therefore,” Damiano continued, turning toward his mother, who had not yet begun to understand, “our Rocco asks for nothing in return for all he has done for us, but to become one of your sons in actual fact: he loves Stella, and Stella cannot find a better husband.”

"Is this indeed true?" asked old Teresa, who with her dim eyes sought to discover if the lad were present.

"He did not wish to remain here," said Celso, "perhaps because he dared not hope too much."

"And," Damiano added, "he wishes to leave you and Stella free in your decision. But we know how he feels; we know that no one else has a heart like his. And you, Stella mine, you who for some time have learned to love and esteem him—what do you say?"

"I never have known a better man than he," timidly answered the girl.

"And further, is it not true," Damiano turned to her to say, "that we must acknowledge we are living on his bread?"

"Shall you be content?" asked Teresa of her daughter.

"Near you, mamma, and with him, I feel that I shall be content." And she drew nearer and threw her arms about the mother's neck.

"But," Damiano said, "you do not yet know all the goodness of our Rocco. His one hope has been to marry you, Stella; but he never has felt the courage to speak, and he would have preferred to go away forever, because he had no name to give you, because he considered himself unworthy of us, and condemned to bear his misfortune alone. Nor is that all. In return for the little good we have been able to do him, he was ready to relinquish everything to us; he wished to do it at whatever cost, and he did not think it was any virtue on his part, but the simplest thing—a mere act of justice."

"Now," said Mother Teresa, "I can die happy. There is no grief without its consolation."

"Are you happy, Stella?" inquired Damiano. "Rocco, I hope, is a man after your own heart. Now leave the rest to me. I am going in search of him down there in the pine-grove, where I think he is awaiting me. I, too, have had a day of joy, after so long a time!"

He descended toward the spot where his friend had taken refuge, with a pure joy in his heart such as he never had expected to experience again. The moon was rising clear and bright from behind the mountain-tops, in a sky sown with stars.

It was found necessary, however, to let some months elapse before the young pair became husband and wife. The consent of the matrimonial tribunal must first be secured, and as the change of domicile of Teresa's family had not yet been legally sanctioned they had to wait until the tribunal, the prefecture, and the local parliament, after the necessary papers had been drawn up, had officially recognized the change. For this purpose, Damiano and Rocco, though somewhat against the grain, had to make more than one journey to Milan. Here the protection of the kind chaplain of the Hospital stood them in good stead in smoothing away other difficulties which they had not anticipated. Then it was decided, although much time had already been lost, to wait until Don Celso could celebrate the nuptial mass. For this, new arrangements had to be entered into in order to obtain the canonical dispensation of the state. But at last it was settled that Don Celso's first mass and Stella's marriage should occur together after Pentecost of that year.

At last the wishes of the little family were fulfilled. The peasants of the village and the surrounding country, full of curiosity and interest, flocked to attend the first mass of the young priest who by the gentleness of his manners and the simplicity of his life had already succeeded in winning their affections. The altar was adorned with beautiful decorations, and the façade of the church, instead of being hung with tapestry, was covered with branches of myrtle and laurel. The festive sound of the organ harmonized with the sacred canticles of the mountaineers.

The newly risen sun had already gilded the heights,

and the weather was beautiful. On the road that led across the village to the little temple might be seen long lines of women and girls, nearly all dressed alike in the plain but picturesque fashion of our Alpine mountaineers: a jacket of coarse orange-colored silk tightly fitted to the bust, a short skirt of dark cotton which revealed half the leg, Turkish drawers and high shoes. But what chiefly attracted attention were the frank countenances, the black and restless eyes, the dark and shining hair, with its crown of silver pins. They were accompanying to church the charming Stella, whom they all loved. She also was attired in a new costume of the mountaineer pattern, which made her look a hundred times prettier than ever. Mother Teresa followed in her footsteps, Damiano and Rocco had preceded her into the church.

Don Celso, assisted by the old curate, celebrated for the first time the holy sacrifice. The religious ceremony moved many hearts, the mother of the young priest weeping with tenderness. At the end of the mass, Rocco and Stella knelt on the steps of the altar, Don Celso blessed them, received from them the sacred promises, and pronounced the words that the Lord has prescribed.

During the ceremony Damiano had drawn aside, absorbed in the thought of that happiness of which he was a portion. When he saw his friend and his sister descend hand in hand from the altar, he heard a voice in his heart which said: "They will be happy, and you may now follow the path that opens before you."

The young couple went to dwell in the little house, where Rocco had hitherto refused to set foot, and which he had beautified as well as he knew how, so that it might be worthy of the child of Napoleon's old soldier. The ground he owned was sufficient to enable them to live the humble and obscure life of the country, a life that was neither rich nor poor, but happy enough. Mother Teresa was unwilling to leave her dear Celso,

and as the two houses were but a stone's throw from each other, it may be said that they still made but a single family.

They had nothing more to desire; but Damiano nourished other plans, other hopes and ideals. The long struggle he had sustained in these latter years had robbed him forever of the freshness of desire, of the peace of faith. After he had come to recognize the predominance of arrogance and hypocrisy, and after the evildoers of this world, from which he had demanded so little, had inoculated him with the venom of hatred, his youthful ardor had turned into torpor and indifference; he had wished to live only for his dear ones, and all in vain; he felt the need of loving, and, poor and persecuted, he loved the poor and persecuted, and the desire for their sake to make a sacrifice of himself and of what little remained to him in life became his constant and only inspiration—the goal of all his hopes.

The winter passed uneventfully. Damiano, more cheerful than usual, remained almost ever by the side of his mother and his sister, attending with livelier and more intelligent forethought to the cares of the house and the school, satisfied that the future was assured to his dear ones. Stella, his favorite, had not for a long time seen him so alert and serene. At the return of spring he made a long journey without revealing its purpose to anyone, and he came back in a week.

A little later he asked his mother's permission to go on another journey. After much hesitation, he confessed that this absence might last a year, but that the happiness of all his future depended upon it. The poor old woman responded with tears, but she could not say him nay. She pressed him to her heart and gave him her blessing. Next day, at sunrise, with Stella as his companion, he slowly ascended the tall mountain that overlooks the Lake of Lugano. What he confided to her on the way, no one ever knew. Reaching the sum-

mit he broke two branches from an old oak and bound them together with a withe in the form of a cross. For some time the pair sat on that mountain-top; then he planted the cross in the fissure of a rock, embraced his sister, kissed her on the forehead without a sob or a tear, and said:

"Farewell! If I never return, you will come and pray for me beside this cross. Until this day I have done what little I could for our mother and for you; now I have another mother, to whom I owe my heart and my life. My secret is yours; good-by!"

He tore himself from her arms, and descended with rapid steps the other side of the mountain.

Years passed away, but his family never saw him again.

Thirteen years later, in the humble cemetery of the village, on the night of All Souls' Day, a woman knelt in prayer upon the greensward. Two children, one of whom was perhaps ten years old, the other not more than seven, with their little hands clasped together and their eyes fixed upon a nameless cross, appeared to be accompanying her orisons.

The sun set; and the woman, having fulfilled her pious duties toward her dead, left the cemetery hand in hand with the two little children. She did not look more than thirty years of age; her face was gentle and still beautiful, with that mature beauty which seems to denote a melancholy peace of mind and heart. She was attired in a short and modest skirt of striped cloth, in the fashion of the country, her head and half of her person were covered by a black shawl; her step was slow and composed. The smaller of the children, as soon as they were outside of the enclosure, drew close to the woman, and said in a voice half of fear and half of pity:

"Mamma, look at that soldier sitting on the ground against the wall!"

She looked toward the spot where her son pointed, and saw a man, half hidden by a hedge, and lying rather than sitting, with his back against the wall. As if conscious that he was discovered, he made an effort to raise himself to his feet, grasping at the wall and at the shrubbery. He succeeded, and came toward them.

From his furrowed, sallow and dust-covered face, his gloomy and suspicious eyes, which shone from below the shadows of a large felt hat decorated with a falcon's feather, from his cloak, the color of which was hard to guess, through its coating of blood and grime, but which looked as if it might have been red, from the vacillating step which he could hardly sustain with the butt-end of a short rifle, the good woman guessed that this soldier must be some poor fugitive, who, wounded and lost, had dragged himself to this spot, and, through lack of breath or fear of being seen, had halted there to await the night. No long time had elapsed since the last battle had been fought quite close to that valley; for nearly two months the silences of that Alpine retreat had been disturbed by the alarms of war, by the passage of armed troops, by the booming of distant cannon. In the village itself, people had hoped and trembled. Not a few of the younger ones had run to offer their arms and their lives. But it had all been in vain. Now everything was finished.

"You are a soldier of our country," said the woman, as soon as the stranger had approached her. "Perhaps you have need of something. Perhaps you are wounded, weary. Come with me; here in our country there are good people"—

"I thank you with all my heart," answered the unfortunate man. "For more than a month I have been hanging between life and death, in the hovel of a poor charcoal-burner, on the other side of the mountain. Yesterday I put myself again on the road, but I counted too much upon being cured. If you will give me the charity

of a bit of bread, will let me sleep under cover to-night, so that I may regain a little of my strength, and put myself in condition to cross the frontier to-morrow, I will bless you and God will reward you."

These words, the courtesy with which they were uttered, and still more a certain delicacy of features, which, though begrimed and marked by suffering, indicated that he had known better days, all profoundly stirred Stella's heart. She felt an inexpressible compassion for this man. Making him a sign to follow her, she moved slowly on. Her two boys, following in the rear, gazed on the unknown with curious and attentive eyes. The elder, with a strength above his years, offered him his arm as a support; the little one had possessed himself of the rifle, which he bore with childish pride upon his shoulder.

Through a remote little street they had reached a house outside the boundary line. Here a robust countryman, dressed in a mountaineer's jacket, came forward to meet them. He immediately understood the charitable design of his wife.

"My good, brave Stella!" he said, and then extended his hand to the unfortunate fugitive, while his kind and loving heart shone out of his eyes.

"After all that has happened," he said, "in which I myself once bore my share, the only consolation that remains is to clasp the hand of a brother. And it is you, Stella, who have given me this consolation. The soul of Mamma Teresa, for whom you have been praying and whom we lost three years ago, will rejoice at seeing you do a good deed. And you, my little Damiano"—he placed his hand upon the head of the elder boy—"remember that you must have a heart like the heart of this man; and as to you, Vittorino, perhaps some day your father may be able to give you a playfellow such as that you are now bearing upon your shoulder."

The fugitive soldier passed the night under the tran-

quil roof of our friends. At the first dawn of day he rose to leave. Before parting with his hosts he turned timidly to Stella, and telling her that the memory of their generous hospitality would remain with him until death, he took from his finger and offered to her a little gold ring. She did not wish to accept it, but, looking at it closer, she thought she recognized it, from a cross engraved on the seal, as the last gift she had made to Damiano thirteen years ago, on the day of his departure. The affectionate woman turned pale, but gathering up her courage, asked the unknown where he had chanced upon that ring.

"It is the dearest token I possess," he replied. "I have worn it for ten years. A friend of mine, a brave and daring youth, gave it to me on the very day he died for liberty there on American shores, at Montevideo. My poor Damiano!"





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